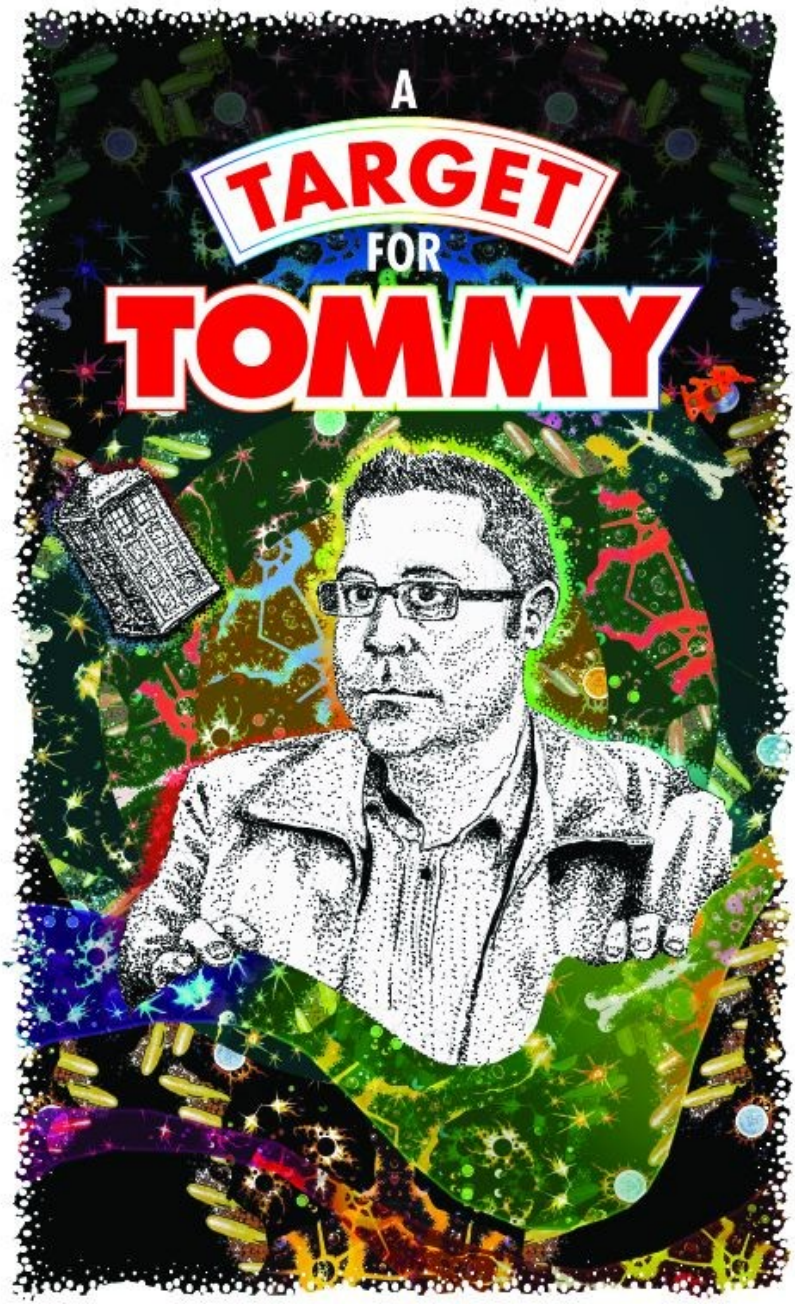
A
TARGET
FOR
TOMMY

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A TARGET FOR TOMMY

A Doctor Who Fanthology

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Street of the Scream

Sharon Tregenza

Beware the scream that can't be seen, the icy stare, beware, beware – or it will push you over.

Saved by the bell? All well, all well, saved by the bell - it cannot push you over.

The whole class sang it as loud as they could and then burst out laughing. I had no idea what the hell they were doing and felt even more like the new kid than ever.

Ms Penrose laughed too. 'Okay you guys, enough, enough now.' She flapped her hands to make everyone sit back down. 'So, your holiday project is local myths and legends.'

She turned to me. 'Ollie, I believe you've moved into the old Lanyon place on the dunes?'

This provoked an outburst of hoots and shouts and dumb zombie impressions. What the…?

I nodded.

'Then you probably already know about the Street of the Scream?'

More wolf howls and ghost moans.

'No,' I said.

For a second there was an eerie silence in the classroom. Then the noises erupted again.

'Enooough,' Ms Penrose called out. She turned back to me with a serious look on her face. 'Where you live there's a story, a legend. It's all rubbish of course and I don't want to scare you. I'll tell you what, you can make your own enquires; it'll be a more interesting project. An outsider's view - not that I mean you're an outsider, Ollie,' she added quickly.

She turned to the class. 'You'll work in pairs and, to help Ollie with

the Street of the Scream legend, I think it should be…'

As she scanned the class, inside my head I whispered, Kenza, Kenza, Kenza.

'Kenza,' Ms Penrose said and I had to stop myself from fist pumping the air.

This was my chance to impress the most popular girl in the class. I may be rubbish at sports but I was smart. Once she got to know just how smart I was, maybe…

It was break before I caught up with Kenza. She was sitting alone on the low stonewall that divided the playground from the tennis courts.

'So what's the deal with this 'Scream' crap?' I said. I tried to sound casual and cool but my voice chose that moment to break and came out of my mouth like a duck squawk.

She giggled and I felt my face redden.

A group of girls rushed over, surrounded Kenza and began a garbled story about some local band. Shrieks and laughter drowned out any hopes of a quiet talk so I hoisted my backpack onto my shoulder and stood up.

Kenza grabbed my wrist, slid my shirtsleeve up and scribbled a series of numbers on my arm. She mumbled something.

'What?

Snatching the pen lid from between her perfect teeth she said, 'text me.'

I ran my fingers gently across the numbers and smiled.

Mum was making a Cornish flag by gluing seashells painted black and white onto a piece of chipboard. Since we'd moved to Cornwall six months before she'd gone Cornish crazy.

'I love it here, Ollie. I love it so much, the sea, the light. Everything. Cornwall is my spiritual home.'

Well maybe it was hers but I wasn't sure it was mine. I missed my

old school, my friends, Bristol. And with Dad working away, I missed him too.

I wriggled out of my backpack and let it drop with a thud to the floor. 'What do you know about the Street of the Scream,' I said.

She frowned. 'Funny you should ask that. We were talking about it last evening. I told the people at my Cornish Culture class we'd moved into Mrs Lanyon's house and they got all silly. They made ghost noises and stuff and one started singing this song. Something about beware, beware and listening for a bell.'

Mum flicked her hand to dislodge a shell that was stuck to her fingers. It shot off, pinged against the microwave and ricocheted into a corner.

She ignored it.

'Wait. Here. Look,' she said.

I followed her over to the window and focused on where she pointed across the sand dunes to the cliff edge.

'See? Those piles of rubble were once cottages, part of a street of houses. In the great storm of 1916 a huge chunk of the cliff collapsed into the sea, taking several homes and drowning a whole family.'

She shuddered. 'Just imagine, Ollie. Horrible.'

'Yeah, but what's all the scream stuff?'

'Oh that? Apparently, where that lost street was, is haunted.' She screwed up her nose. 'No one seemed sure of the legend. They had different stories. Some of them said on the anniversary of the storm you hear screams in the night, some that you can hear screams during storms. Just screams really.'

She opened a cupboard, took out a saucepan and put it on the hob.

'It's probably gulls, or the wind howling between the sand dunes. Nice creepy little Cornish myth though, don't you think? Beans and fish fingers be okay?'

'Yeah. Beans and fish fingers are fine.'

I Googled: *Street of the Scream, Perran Sands, Cornwall***. Not much help there - bits and pieces on legend sites about ghostly screams and an article about the disaster of the great storm of 1916.**

I read:

Mr and Mrs Arthur Carew, their fourteen year old daughter and ten year old son are missing, presumed dead, after last night's storm. Their home, at Perran Sands, plummeted into the icy seas when the cliff top collapsed at high tide. The rest of the street has been evacuated…

I lay face down on my bed and texted Kenza:

Meet me on the

Street of the Scream

tonight at 12:00.

Research for our project?

Ollie

It took a few minutes but when my mobile rang its text alert, I saw:

Totally!

Kenza

I sat upright. My heart thudded. I didn't expect that. I was only joking. What now? I'd have to go. She'd think I was a total wuss if I backed out. Damn.

I looked out of my window into the darkness. A sudden shower of rain rattled against the glass like pebbles. Damn. Damn.

Almost midnight. The stairs didn't creak and the door unlocked silently. No reprieve by irate mother for me, then.

I stepped outside. The sand dunes were lumpy with shadows and the sea a mass of solid silver in the moonlight. The rain had stopped but clumps of damp sand clung to my trainers as I walked.

I reached the spot where rough squares of old stones and rubble showed where a line of cottages had once stood. They led to a massive

gouge in the cliff. A black cleft hollowed out where the rest of the street should have been.

I turned full circle. No sign of Kenza.

The sea churned slowly. A night breeze moaned through the patches of long grass and they undulated like sea anemones. A shiver ran through me.

I texted:

I'm here. Where R U?

Ollie

The moon disappeared behind a cloud and the sudden darkness made my skin crawl. I darted quick looks around me and took a deep breath, sucking in air that tasted of salt.

When the moonlight returned I saw her. She was standing above me on the crest of a sand dune, watching. For one joyful second I thought it was Kenza, but quickly realised this girl was taller, darker. She was wearing something long and white like a nightdress and her hair hung wet across her shoulders.

There was something wrong about her. Odd. As if she was a photograph cut out of night colours. As we stared at each other the sound seemed to drain out of the air.

Then, like a wave, she slid down the dune towards me in a shower of sand.

Into the intense silence she screamed. She screamed with her whole body. Her eyes locked wide and the black hole of her mouth stretched and rigid.

The scream hit me like a blow. I staggered backwards. My heart thudded like a rock inside my chest.

The next scream was even louder - the most piercing sound I'd ever heard – wild with hysteria.

I tried to run but my legs felt like water. In a panic, I stumbled and fell to the ground. I lay there, curled my knees up into my body and

squeezed my eyes shut.

Somewhere inside the depth of the terrible scream I heard another sound. A bell.

The scream stopped dead. Instantly replaced by the whisper of the wind.

I forced myself to count to ten before I opened my eyes. The girl was gone.

My mobile was a bright rectangle of light in my hand. I scrambled to my feet swinging the phone back and forth like a torch.

I saw then how close I was to the edge of the cliff. Less than a foot away the ground dropped steeply down to the jagged rocks and sea far below.

I ran. Racing back across the dunes in wild frightened leaps.

In the safety of my bedroom I dived under the duvet, my body shaking uncontrollably. My mobile was still gripped firmly in my hand and I stared at the text:

R U CRAZY? I'm not really

going to meet U in

some haunted street

at Midnight.

C U tomorrow.

Kenza x

I didn't sleep at all that night. As my heartbeat gradually returned to normal I lay thinking over what had happened in the Street of the Scream.

I mean ghosts aren't real. Right? So what the hell…?

The creepy song played over and over in my head like some horror movie opening:

Beware the scream that can't be seen, the icy stare, beware, beware –

or it will push you over.

And, anyway, if some hundred year-old ghostly drowned girl was trying to murder me why had she stopped?

Then I remembered. The text from Kenza. As I teetered on the cliff edge my mobile had rung.

Into my confused brain crept the last line of that song:

Saved by the bell? All well, all well, saved by the bell - it cannot push you over.

Curse of the Bog Women

Barry Hutchison

Donna Noble woke up to find a man at the bottom of her bed. She groaned, rolled over and pulled the covers over her head.

‘What now?’ she grunted. ‘Alien invasion?’

‘Nope.’

‘Robot Easter bunnies?’

‘Nope.’

‘Broken, I don’t know… time thingy?’

‘Ooh, I hope not!’

Donna poked her head above the covers and glared at the strange man in her bedroom. ‘Strange’, she thought, being the operative word. ‘Well what, then?’

The Doctor flashed her a smile. ‘Fancy a little day trip?’

What was, to the Doctor’s mind, an inexplicably long time later, a fully-dressed Donna joined him in the TARDIS. Her initial annoyance at being woken up seemed to have passed – for the moment, at least – and she grinned excitedly as she approached the console.

‘Where we off to, then?’ she asked. ‘Mars?’

‘Mars?’ said the Doctor, tapping at a keyboard. ‘What would we go to Mars for? It’s rubbish, Mars.’

‘Alright, well I don’t know,’ said Donna. ‘Some sort of, like, exploding volcano thing that shoots out butterflies?’

‘Ooh, that sounds good,’ said the Doctor, twisting a twisty-thing. He knew it was important to twist it regularly, but couldn’t for the life of him remember why. ‘But, no. Better.’

Donna shrugged. ‘The future. The past. The present. No, wait,

we're in the present, aren't we?' She frowned. 'Oh, I dunno. Just tell me.'

The Doctor turned from the console and grinned. 'Scotland!' he announced.

Donna blinked. 'Scotland?'

'Aye, lassie,' he said, adopting a broad Scottish brogue.

'As in, like… *Scotland* **Scotland?'**

The Doctor nodded.

'Not a different planet that just happens to be called Scotland?'

The Doctor shook his head.

'*Actual* **Scotland?'**

'Yes!' cried the Doctor. 'We're actually going to actual Scotland! Ever been?'

'No, don't think so,' said Donna.

'What, never?' asked the Doctor. His eyes crept to her hair. 'I though, you know, what with you being…'

'Being what?' demanded Donna.

'So well-travelled,' said the Doctor, turning back to the console.

'You were going to say 'ginger,' weren't you?'

The Doctor puffed out his cheeks. 'What? Me? No! Goodness, is that the time?' He flicked a lever. The engines *Vworped***, and all of time and its relative dimensions in space opened up around them.**

The Doctor threw open the doors to the TARDIS and inhaled deeply. 'Aah, smell that, Donna? That's the smell of Scotland.'

Donna's face screwed up. 'It's the smell of cows.'

'Highland cows, probably,' said the Doctor. 'Which is ironic, because they didn't actually originate here in the Highlands.'

‘So, where did they originate?’ Donna asked. ‘I can tell you’re dying to tell me.’

‘Keppak Nine, in the Slarvak quadrant.’

Donna sighed. ‘I wish I’d never asked.’

The Doctor stepped out. His foot was immediately swallowed up to the ankle. ‘Watch out, it’s boggy,’ he said, *schlopping* **a few steps through the gungy mud until he reached more solid ground. Behind him, he heard Donna grumble.**

‘You can buy me a new pair of shoes after this,’ she said, squelching over to join him. She cast her gaze across the bracken and heather to a small clump of ramshackle buildings in the middle distance. ‘Assuming they’ve got a shop.’

The Doctor’s face lit up. ‘I do love a little shop.’ He held out an arm. ‘Shall we?’

Donna took it. They both stepped forwards. Their feet were swallowed once again by the marshy ground. ‘Maybe we should take the TARDIS,’ the Doctor said.

They turned.

They stopped.

‘Doctor?’

‘Yes, Donna?’

‘Where *is* **the TARDIS?’**

Just ahead of them, a bubble of air rose to the surface of the bog and popped, releasing a cloud of stinking gas. ‘Yeah,’ the Doctor said, rolling the word around. ‘It’ll be fine. You closed the door.’ He shot Donna a look. ‘You did close the door?’

‘I thought you did,’ said Donna. She smirked when she saw the expression of horror on the Doctor’s face. ‘Gotcha!’ she laughed. She jabbed a thumb in the direction of the bog. ‘You *can* **get it back, can’t you?’**

‘What?’ said the Doctor. ‘Oh, yeah! I can just use a Stattenheim

remote control to fly it out,' he said. 'Or, you know, I could. If I had one.'

Donna watched him expectantly. 'You're going to say 'gotcha' now, aren't you?'

The Doctor turned and set off towards the village in the distance. 'Off we go!'

'You are, aren't you?' said Donna, picking her way through the bogs as she followed him. 'You're going to say 'gotcha' any second, aren't you? Doctor? Aren't you?'

Twenty minutes, a lot of moaning, and one lost shoe later, Donna and the Doctor stood at the edge of the bogs. A narrow track, just wide enough for two horse-and-carriages to squeeze past each other, led towards the village. A stone marker beside the track announced: GLEN LACHART, 1 MILE.

'I hate Scotland,' Donna wheezed. She was flecked with mud, dotted with midge bites, and leaning slightly to the left due to the lack of shoe on that side. 'What year is this, anyway?'

The Doctor leaned down, plucked a long piece of grass, then bit the end off and chewed it. 'I'd say… fifteen-forty-two,' he announced.

A small red Royal Mail van trundled around a corner up ahead.

'On a Wednesday afternoon, sometime in the early 21st Century,' said the Doctor, rallying quickly.

Donna rolled her eyes. 'How *do* you do it?'

'I know. Uncanny, isn't it?' said the Doctor. He raised his arms and waved to the van as it trundled up the track towards them.

The van stopped. The door opened. An overweight man with a greying quiff and sideburns emerged and looked them slowly up and down. 'Howdy,' he said, taking them by surprise with his American Deep South drawl. 'Can I help you folks?'

Donna and the Doctor sat wedged in the front passenger seats of the van, holding on for dear life as it bounced and rattled back down the track. Donna was staring at the postman as he drove, trying to figure

out where she recognised him from.

‘Well now,’ he said. ‘What brings you folks to Glen Lachart? You taking care of some business here?’

‘Day trip, really,’ said the Doctor. ‘Thought we’d swing by, see the sights, lose a shoe in the bogs…’

The postman turned and raised an eyebrow. ‘The bogs? You were out on the bogs?’

‘Yeah,’ said Donna, squinting at the man’s nose. It was an oddly familiar nose. ‘Worst experience of my life.’ She thought back to her last few weeks with the Doctor. ‘Top five, anyway.’

‘Forget your shoe, count yourself lucky you still got your life, honey,’ the postman drawled. ‘There’s all kinds of bad business going down out there on the bogs. All kinds.’

The Doctor leaned closer. ‘Oh?’

The postie waved a hand. ‘I said too much, man. I’m sorry.’

Fumbling in his pocket, the Doctor brought out the Psychic Paper. He held it open. ‘It’s OK, you can tell me,’ he said.

The postman glanced at the paper. His jaw dropped. ‘CIA?’ he said. ‘You ain’t come to take me back, have you? Not after all these years.’

The Doctor frowned. ‘What? Uh…’

‘I built a life here, man,’ the postman protested, his accent growing even more pronounced. ‘I blended in, disappeared, just like we agreed.’

‘What’s he on about?’ Donna asked, turning to the Doctor. She turned back to the postman. ‘What you on about?’

The postman stiffened. He glanced from the Doctor to Donna and back again. ‘Uh, just messin’ with you, is all,’ he said. ‘Best thing is I take you to see Constable McClelland. He’ll be able to fill you in.’

‘Excellent,’ said the Doctor. ‘Where will we find him?’

The van screeched to a halt outside a quaint-looking village pub.

‘The Pig and Bicycle,’ said the Doctor, reading the sign.

‘He’s right in there,’ said the postman. ‘Y’all tell him I said hello.’

‘Will do,’ said the Doctor. He and Donna clambered out. They waved as he pulled away from the kerb.

‘Where do I recognise him from?’ Donna wondered. The van stopped and reversed until it was beside them again. The postman leaned down so he could see them through the side window.

‘Uh, I’d appreciate it if you didn’t go mentioning all that ‘taking me back’ stuff,’ he said.

The Doctor nodded. ‘Our lips are sealed.’

The postman’s top lip curled into a smile. ‘Well, like I say, I appreciate that,’ he drawled.

He drove off again. Donna watched the van until it turned a corner and disappeared out of sight. ‘I do. I definitely know him from somewhere,’ she said.

She and the Doctor both turned towards the pub, then stopped when they spotted a molehill-sized pile of ash on the pavement directly outside. ‘Hello,’ said the Doctor. ‘What’s this?’

‘Smoking ban,’ said Donna, knowingly. ‘Happening everywhere these days. Everyone has to come outside to light up.’ She shook her head at the ash-mound. ‘That’s the result. Disgusting.’

The Doctor squatted down. Glancing around to make sure no-one was watching, he scanned the mound with his sonic screwdriver. ‘Don’t think that’s cigarette ash,’ he said, studying the results.

‘Cigar?’ Donna guessed. ‘Not pipe? Don’t say pipe. I hate pipes.’

‘Human,’ said the Doctor.

Donna shifted uneasily on her feet. ‘Oh,’ she said. ‘Right.’ She shrugged. ‘Still, at least it’s not a pipe.’

The Doctor stood up. Donna scowled at him. ‘You knew this was going to happen, didn’t you?’ she said. ‘You came here deliberately.’

‘Well,’ said the Doctor, dragging the word out. ‘Depends how you define ‘deliberately,’ I suppose.’

‘’On purpose,’’ said Donna.

‘Right,’ said the Doctor. ‘Well, I suppose if you’re going by *that* definition… yes.’ He gestured towards the door. ‘Shall we?’

A record-player scratched to a stop as Donna and the Doctor stepped into the dimly-lit bar. The barman, a hulking figure in a checked shirt, with eyes that could have been set in place with a *Black & Decker* workmate, looked up as they entered.

‘Sorry,’ he said, giving the record player a dunt. ‘Always daein’ that.’ He smiled broadly. ‘Now, whit can I dae fur ye?’

‘We’re looking for Constable McClelland,’ said the Doctor.

There was a scuffling from the corner. The Doctor turned in time to see a balding head duck behind a newspaper. The Doctor glanced at the barman, who gave him a single nod, then went back to polishing a glass.

‘Afternoon, officer,’ said the Doctor, lowering himself into the seat directly across the table from the now-trembling issue of The Glen Lachart Star. The headline: ‘FENCE BROKEN!’ screamed from the front page.

The newspaper snapped down, revealing a short, middle-aged man in a crumpled uniform. ‘It’s about the murders, isn’t it?’ he said.

The Doctor and Donna exchanged a glance. ‘Um… yes?’ said the Doctor.

‘Definitely,’ agreed Donna. She sat next to the Doctor and leaned in. ‘What murders?’

Constable McClelland’s eyes darted between them.

‘What she means is, what can you tell us about the murders?’ said the Doctor.

McClelland looked a little taken aback. ‘Me? Nothing to do with me!’

‘Well it kind of is,’ said the Doctor, casting a very deliberate glance down to his uniform. ‘Pretty sure it’s in the job description somewhere.’

Constable McClelland stared blankly back at him.

‘You know,’ said the Doctor. ‘Like, somewhere in your handbook there’ll be the word, ‘Murder,’ and then maybe a tick beside it, or… No?’

‘Is any of that ringing any bells?’ Donna asked.

The policeman’s face had turned a shade of grey. He reached for a glass and raised it to his lips, shaking droplets of whisky all over the table. ‘Oh aye, murder’s one thing,’ he said. ‘But it’s not a murderer we’ve got in the village. It’s a curse.’

He managed a sip of his drink. ‘It’s the Curse of the Bog Women.’

Donna gasped. The record player screeched to a scratchy halt.

‘Sorry,’ called the barman. ‘Really must get that fixed.’

‘I’m a simple man,’ McClelland said. ‘You lose your keys? I’m on it. Your bike gets stolen? I can’t promise anything, but I’ll do my best. You want to talk about crime, you call me. You want to talk about ancient curses bringing forth unspeakable evil? There’s only one man you talk to about that.’

‘Who’s that, then?’ asked Donna.

McClelland drained his glass. ‘The Doctor,’ he said.

The Doctor blinked. ‘The Doctor?’

‘Aye,’ said McClelland. ‘The Doctor.’

‘Dr Hoffenheim, a pleasure to meet you, a pleasure!’ chirped a tall, skinny man with hair so wispy and white it was practically transparent. He stepped aside, welcoming the visitors into the hallway of his ramshackle cottage. ‘And to what do I owe it?’

Donna followed the Doctor into the hall, then almost screamed when she spotted an enormous stag staring at her. It took her a moment to realise it was just a head, stuffed and mounted on the wall above one of

the three doors leading off from the hallway. It was the only one of the three, she noticed, to be closed.

'So you're the doctor?' said the Doctor. 'Me too!'

'Oh!' said Dr Hoffenheim. 'Yes. Zoology. You?'

'Just, you know, in general,' said the Doctor. He ran a hand across a bookcase that groaned under the weight of dust and books, in that order. 'Zoologist, eh?' He turned to Donna. 'Sort of a biologist for animals.'

Donna tutted. 'Well, I didn't think it was someone who designed zoos,' she lied.

'Uh, do you realise you are only wearing one shoe?' Hoffeheim asked.

'Yeah,' said Donna through gritted teeth. 'I'd noticed.'

The Doctor turned to the other doctor. 'Apparently, you're the man to ask about this curse.'

Dr Hoffenheim nodded. 'Ah. The Curse of the Bog Women. Yes, I know all about it.'

'I'm surprised,' said the Doctor. 'Man of science like you…'

'It's poppycock, of course,' said Dr Hoffenheim. 'Please, come with me.'

He stepped past Donna and threw open the door to her nightmares. Heads hung from practically every square foot of wall, their glassy eyes staring accusingly at her as Dr Hoffenheim led them into the room. She recognised some of them – another deer, a badger, something that was probably a stoat or an otter or something. None of them looked particularly happy to be there.

'Apologies,' said Dr Hoffenheim, catching Donna's expression. 'It can be… disconcerting, if you're not used to it.'

Donna pulled herself together. 'What, this? Nah. This doesn't bother me in the—*Bloody Hell, is that a hippo***?'**

Hoffenheim didn't even have to look. 'Yes. But just a little one,' he

said. 'Their jaws are fascinating.'

Donna cupped a hand around her mouth. 'Hear that, mate? Your jaw's fascinating.' She listened for a moment, then turned back to the zoologist. 'Aw, that's made his day, that has.'

The Doctor had continued past both of them and stopped at a table. There were three large glass containers there, each one holding a similarly-sized mound of ash.

'The Munro sister,' said Dr Hoffenheim, gravely. 'Triplets, actually.'

Donna peered down at the ashes. 'What did you do, run fingerprints?'

'No,' said Dr Hoffenheim, drawing himself up to his full height. 'I watched them die.'

Donna squirmed uncomfortably. 'Yeah, fair enough, that'd do it.'

'What happened?' asked the Doctor.

Dr Hoffenheim pulled a wooden chair out from beneath the table and lowered himself into it. He gazed at the ashes for a few moments, composing himself. 'There was… a creature. I'm embarrassed to say I don't know how else to describe it. Humanoid, I suppose, but larger. Female, I think. There was evidence of enlarged mammary glands.'

The Doctor turned to Donna. 'He means--'

'Yes, I know what he means, thanks,' Donna said.

'Its skin was a… living slime. Like the mud found out in the bogs, but moving as if alive,' Hoffenheim continued.

'Bog Women,' said the Doctor.

'Precisely,' said Hoffenheim. 'It is a local legend. The tale goes that should the land around the village ever be defiled, the Bog Women will rise up to take an unholy revenge.'

'And has it been?' whispered Donna, who loved a good curse legend. 'Defiled, I mean?'

Dr Hoffenheim shrugged. 'The local golf club has just dug up a field to build a new hole for their course. That'll bring them up to six now.'

'Six courses?' said Donna.

'Six holes,' Hoffenheim corrected. 'It's not a very big club.'

'So what'd it do then, this Bog Woman?' the Doctor asked. He took out his screwdriver and scanned the ash.

'Yes, it… what is that?' asked Hoffenheim.

'Hmm? Oh, this? Nothing. It's just a gizmo.'

'A gizmo?'

'Yes. Or a gadget. I can never remember which,' said the Doctor, slipping the screwdriver back in his pocket. 'Sorry, you were saying?'

Hoffenheim hesitated. 'Uh… yes. The sisters, they were… outside the village. By the bogs. Suddenly, there it was. This… thing. This Bog Woman, rising out of the murk behind them. It touched them – just touched them with its hand – and they were gone. Reduced to ash.'

'What were you doing out there?' Donna asked.

Hoffenheim swallowed nervously. 'I'm sorry?'

'Why were you out at the bogs with three triplets?'

The zoologist stammered. 'Uh, no. I was not *with* them, exactly. I was… observing them.'

'You mean you were spying on them?' said Donna.

Dr Hoffenheim's face was crimson as he looked down at the floor. 'They, uh, liked to sunbathe. Nude.'

Donna gasped. 'You dirty old man.'

'I tried to help them, you must understand,' Dr Hoffenheim insisted. 'I called to them. Shouted. But they didn't hear me.'

'What about the Bog Woman?' asked the Doctor. 'What happened to it?'

‘It returned to the bogs. I scooped up what I could of the sisters and brought them back here.’

‘What a gent,’ said Donna.

‘We saw another pile of dust like this outside the pub,’ said the Doctor. Hoffenheim’s eyes went wide.

‘You did? Here in the village? Then perhaps the curse is true.’

‘Well, I don’t put a lot of faith in curses,’ said the Doctor. ‘But--’

A scream from outside interrupted him before he could finish his sentence. He pointed to another door at the back of the room. ‘Does that lead outside?’

‘What? No!’ Hoffenheim yelped. ‘That’s… nothing. Just storage. Back the way you came.’

‘Donna, stay here,’ the Doctor ordered, running for the exit.

‘Yeah, right, like that’s going to happen,’ said Donna, hobbling along behind.

They ran out into the village’s single narrow street in time to see Constable McClelland come puffing and panting out of the pub. ‘The shop!’ he wheezed, pointing along the street. ‘It came from the shop!’

‘They do have a little shop!’ the Doctor chirped. He broke into a sprint, overshot a tiny corner store by several paces, then hurriedly doubled-back. He was almost at the front door when it exploded outwards, showering the street in wood and glass and…

‘Ugh, slime!’ Donna yelped, scooping a splodge of green goo out of her hair. ‘This day just keeps getting better.’

A hulking figure knocked away the remains of the shop’s front window. The Doctor and Donna both stepped back as the thing ducked to get through the gap it had made in the wall.

‘Blimey,’ said Donna. ‘She’s a big ‘un.’

‘Cor, he was right about the enlarged mammary glands, wasn’t he?’ said the Doctor. ‘They’re enormous.’

Donna slapped him on the arm. 'Typical man,' she scolded. 'You're all the same.'

There was a panicky shout from behind them. They spun in time to see Constable McClelland lumbering closer, another huge green slime-thing closing the gap behind him.

'Look out!' yelped Donna, but too late. The Bog Woman clamped a gloopy hand on the policeman's head. As Donna and the Doctor watched, he seemed to fold in on himself as his body withered and turned to ash. 'Ooh,' Donna winced. 'That's got to hurt.'

'This way!' the Doctor urged, grabbing Donna by the hand. He dragged her towards an alleyway leading away from the creatures, but her hobbling soon slowed them down. 'Lose the shoe, Donna!'

'No! I've already lost one. They were expensive!' she protested.

They reached the alley, then scrambled backwards as another of the Bog Women squeezed through the gap. Donna stared up at it in horror. 'It's like the Incredible Hulk's had a mud bath,' she said.

The monsters were closing in on all sides now. The Doctor hopped from foot to foot, his mind racing. 'Think. Think. Curse. Can't be a curse, no such thing as curses. So why now? Why are they here? What do they want?'

'Breast reduction surgery?' Donna guessed. 'I mean, just look at the state of those. Her back must be killing her.'

'Yeah, well she's about to kill us,' said the Doctor. 'Unless I can think of…'

CRASH! **A small red van slammed into one of the creatures from behind. The bonnet crumpled in a squeal of grinding metal. The Bog Woman stumbled, thrown off balance. She fell to the ground, splattering it with mud and gloop.**

The postman gave them a friendly salute, then floored the accelerator and sped off, his engine rocking and rolling beneath the hood.

'I do. I recognise him from somewhere,' Donna muttered. She looked down at the fallen Bog Woman. 'Least she had a cushioned

landing.'

'I can't believe you gave me grief over one comment. You can't stop going on about their massive…' the Doctor began, then he stopped. He slapped himself on the head. 'Mammary glands! Of course!'

The Bog Woman on the ground made a grab for Donna's leg. She hopped out of reach then speed-limped after the Doctor as he raced back towards Dr Hoffenheim's house.

Hurrying inside, Donna fumbled with the door lock. 'Don't bother, that won't hold them!' the Doctor told her. They raced through to the stuffed-head room. Donna slammed the door, rattling the glass eyes of a weasel in their sockets.

Dr Hoffenheim stood up as they entered. 'Everything alright?' he asked.

'Not really,' wheezed Donna.

The Doctor scooped a handful of bog slime from Donna's hair and dropped it onto the table in front of Hoffenheim. 'We've brought you a sample, doctor,' he said.

Hoffenheim peered down at it, his expression blank. 'Oh. Well… thank you.'

'Oh, come on, Doctor Hoffenheim,' the Doctor cried. 'That's a sample of a new species right there. Big one, too. That could make your name, that could.'

From out in the hall, there came the sound of shattering wood. 'They're coming in!' Donna yelped.

Dr Hoffenheim's eyes flitted from the Doctor to the gunk and back again. He smiled anxiously. 'Yes, yes, of course,' he said.

'Do you know, I thought you'd be more excited?' said the Doctor, taking out his sonic screwdriver. 'Unless, of course, you've already studied one.'

The door shook on its hinges. Donna backed away. 'Doctor!'

'I don't know what you mean,' said Hoffenheim.

‘Oh, I think you do,’ said the Doctor. He held up the screwdriver. ‘See, when I scanned those three ash piles, you know what I discovered? That for nudists, those sisters were wrapped in an awful lot of rope.’

The door collapsed inwards with a *crash*. Donna ducked for cover as half a dozen mounted heads fell from the walls and thudded against the floor. A Bog Woman squeezed herself through the doorway, shattering the frame as she forced her way inside.

‘There’s no curse!’ the Doctor cried. ‘There’s just you, an over-ambitious scientist with an eye on making a name for himself, and no care for who has to die along the way. You used those women to lure these creatures out, didn’t you?’

‘What?’ Hoffenheim spluttered. ‘Why would I do such a thing?’

‘Can we hurry this up, Doctor?’ Donna said. ‘This one doesn’t look happy.’

‘And quite right, too!’ said the Doctor. He dodged past Hoffenheim and ran for the door at the back of the room. ‘Why would you do it, doctor? The answer’s been staring us in the face the whole time. Mammary glands.’

He pulled open the door. There, trapped inside a cage, a small swampy figure lay curled up on the floor. ‘Our Bog Woman there’s a Bog Mummy! And you took her baby.’

Donna gasped. ‘I knew he was a wrong ‘un!’ she said. ‘What kind of weirdo keeps a hippo head on the wall?’

‘I had to!’ Hoffenheim protested. ‘No-one would have believed me without a living sample. When I saw the little one… how could I resist? It’s incredible. Breathtaking! Tell me you wouldn’t have done the same, Doctor!’

The Doctor held Hoffenheim’s gaze. He shook his head, just once. ‘I wouldn’t have done the same.’

Hoffenheim shoved the Doctor aside and made a grab for the bars of the cage. ‘I must take it!’ he cried. ‘I can still show it. It can still earn me my place in…’

A small, sludgy hand shot out through the bars. The fingers wrapped around Hoffenheim's wrist. The zoologist made a sound, like a yawn deep at the back of his throat. Then, in a flurry of greys and blacks, his remains floated into a pile on the floor.

The Doctor hurried to the cage, his screwdriver already illuminated. The cage's lock slid free. The Doctor held a hand up to the approaching Bog Woman. 'Wait!' he said, swinging the door open. 'Your baby's safe. It's safe. We're on the same side here.'

The Bog Woman's eyes narrowed. Her gaze went from the Doctor to the cage and back again. Eventually, she let out a whistle. It reminded Donna of birdsong – nice, but with the potential to rapidly get annoying.

A child-sized figure clambered out of the cage on all fours. It glanced briefly at the Doctor and Donna, then straightened up and raced towards it mother. The Bog Woman scooped the child up in her arms and they both whistled in harmony.

With a slow nod to both the Doctor and Donna, the creature turned and left the room, leaving a trail of squidgy footprints in her wake.

'Well,' breathed Donna. 'That didn't go too badly, did it?'

'What, apart from all those deaths, you mean?' said the Doctor.

'Yeah, apart from them, obviously.'

The Doctor nodded. 'Well, apart from them, yeah, not a bad day's work!'

'Course, we've still lost the TARDIS,' Donna pointed out.

The Doctor sighed. 'Oh yes. You had to remind me, didn't you?'

An hour later, the Doctor and Donna stood at the edge of the bog, staring up at a large, gunge-covered rectangle.

'And you say it just rose up?' the Doctor asked, flicking some slime off the TARDIS's door handle. 'By itself?'

'Seemed mighty like it to me, man,' said the postman. 'Almost like something was pushing it outta the bogs from below. If I didn't know

better, I'd say y'all made a friend today.'

'Always good to make friends,' said the Doctor.

'There was something else, too,' said the postman. He held up a leather boot and Donna let out a squeal. 'Reckon this belongs to you, ma'am.'

'Yes!' Donna said. She snatched it off him and wriggled a foot inside. There was a loud, damp *parp* as muddy water and slime oozed out past her ankle. 'I don't even care about that,' Donna insisted, but her face told a different story.

The Doctor held out a hand. 'Well, I guess this is goodbye…?'

'Alvin,' said the postman, shaking it. 'Alvin King.'

The Doctor and Donna stepped into the TARDIS, dodging the muddy drips that fell from above the door. Alvin glanced back at this van, then shot them a worried look. 'And about all that stuff I said earlier, about you folks being here to take me back…'

The Doctor waved a hand. 'Don't remember a thing about it, Mr King,' he said.

As the Doctor closed the door, Alvin's top lip curled into a smile. 'Thank you,' he drawled. 'Thank-you-very-much.'

The door closed. Donna gasped.

'He isn't!'

The Doctor shoved his hands in his pockets and strutted towards the console. 'He is.'

'That's really him?' Donna yelped.

'Oh yes!'

Donna's jaw dropped. 'That's actually him? That's actually Engelbert Humperdinck?'

The Doctor's eyes widened in surprise. He laughed. 'Donna, you never fail to amaze me.' He swivelled the keyboard out in front of him. 'Where to next? Anywhere but Mars.'

‘Oh, I dunno,’ Donna said. She smiled. ‘Surprise me.’

‘OK, then!’ said the Doctor.

And he did.

Miss Hawthorne and the Alpaca of Doom

Paul Magrs

The old White Witch had got them lost up a mountain in Wales.

What on Earth were they doing here? wondered Elton.

The blizzard howled around their small party as they picked their perilous way up the narrow path.

Facing this freezing tumult was the only way to save the old lady's soul and Elton knew that he and Ursula had to see it through.

Miss Olive Hawthorne, White Witch of Devil's End and star of Verity TV's 'Manifestations!' needed their help.

And so did her alpaca.

The demented, shaggy beast was terrified of the raging wind and snow and who could blame it? It was used to a much more sedate life in the grassy alpaca farm in the field adjoining Miss Hawthorne's garden.

'Avaunt, ye spirits!' the witch was crying out against the storm. 'Cease and desist and let us pass!' Her tweedy cloak was flying out behind her as she berated the elements.

Ursula asked, 'Do you think she can actually find this monastery, or not?'

Elton's girlfriend sounded amazingly calm, as if the terrible conditions had little effect on her. Elton knew this to be true, since for the past ten years Ursula had been living her life as a mere face trapped inside a concrete paving stone. This was the rather startling outcome of an adventure they'd had with a heinous alien being known as the Abzorbaloff. As it happened, Ursula had adjusted to her life as a cement paving slab remarkably well, considering. Elton thought she was a marvel. Right now she was strapped to his back along with his haversack. She was weighty and cumbersome, but her calm commonsense was a tonic for Elton, especially in situations such as this.

‘I think I can see lights…’ the elderly witch shouted from ahead. ‘Down in the valley! Perhaps… it’s the monastery!’

‘I bloody well hope so,’ muttered Elton. He didn’t think Miss Hawthorne could withstand these conditions much longer. She was eighty if she was a day, and she was the one leading the belligerent goat / llama-type creature along on a piece of rope.

‘Hold on,’ said Ursula. ‘There are figures coming up the pathway behind us…’

‘And ahead!’ called Miss Hawthorne. ‘Except, I don’t think they’re human beings…’

Elton squinted into the gloom. ‘What are they, then..?’

Suddenly his eyes went wide with horror.

Had it really only been a week ago?

On Hallowe’en Ursula presented Elton with tickets to attend a live broadcast of his favourite spooky TV show, ‘Manifestations.’ It was being broadcast from a field near the Jodrell Bank radio telescope in Cheshire. It was a long trip on Virgin Trains, but they both felt it was worth it, to sit with two hundred other fans in the dark outdoors and watch the show.

Also, Elton had been harbouring suspicions about one of the programme’s mystics for a while. The elderly and most vivacious of the witches and warlocks had caught his attention. He was starting to believe she was the real deal and so he felt it was down to the last remaining members of LINDA (The London Investigation ‘N’ Detective Agency) to do some of their special investigating ‘n’ detecting.

That was how they found themselves seated on plastic chairs beneath the giant radio telescope in a dark field in Cheshire at midnight on Hallowe’en, as a bunch of TV mystics tried – with varying degrees of success – to call up spirits and intelligences from other dimensions.

Most of the show consisted of enjoyable fakery, but when Miss Hawthorne went into her trance she really seemed to be communing

with disembodied extra-dimensional beings. There was a curious buzz in the air: a feeling that this was the real thing. Elton and Ursula knew this was the case, even before the old lady's eyes started glowing a noxious green.

But Miss Hawthorne had emerged unscathed from her momentary possession, and the hostess of 'Manifestations!' looked suitably relieved.

Elton and Ursula caught up with Miss Hawthorne after the broadcast was over. She was in the car park, standing beside her camper van sipping hot tea from a flask and looking shaken.

'I have been selected…' she told them, in a distracted, warbling voice. 'By a very powerful mind. He has sought me out…' Then the witch's eyes clicked into startling, icy focus. 'He is still here!'

All around them the audience were streaming away to their cars and the TV crew members were packing up lights and equipment, keen to get back to their hotel and the bar. Unwilling to leave the old lady (who was still glowing green intermittently) to her own devices, Elton offered to drive her van back home for her. He didn't realise that her home was in the Oxfordshire village of Devil's End and he'd wind up having to drive all night.

'You, my dear sir, are a knight in shining armour,' Miss Hawthorne beamed. 'And so are you, my dear,' she added, staring dubiously at what remained of Ursula.

So they drove south, all through the night. They sang songs in order to keep themselves awake. Miss Hawthorne knew the words to a surprising number of Prog Rock classics, though she made them all sound a bit like 'Onward, Christian Soldiers.'

Sometime around dawn they arrived in her quaint village and in front of her cosy, if shabby, cottage, and by then the three of them had become firm friends.

It was while the tea was brewing that Elton got his first ever glimpse of an alpaca in the flesh. He was having a cheeky ciggy in the back garden when he saw a bunch of the dreadful-looking creatures over the hedge in the field next door. To him they looked like a cross between the devil and the most monstrous sheep in the world. One of them

came over to have a look at him, and spat very deliberately in his face.

'Tea..!' called Miss Hawthorne through the kitchen window.

Now the small party were face to face with a number of creatures far more terrifying than any alpaca.

Miss Hawthorne seemed delighted. 'They're yeti! Yeti in North Wales..!'

The cries were ghastly. Ululating up and down the mountainside.

Elton peered through the freezing mist. 'They never are, are they?' He was calculating whether he and his friends could outrun the deadly – if clumsy-looking - creatures. Possibly not. But actual yeti! His heart was racing for all the wrong reasons.

Ursula had gone very quiet.

She did that quite often these days. She had funny turns, at strange moments.

Something odd and profound was happening to Elton's girlfriend lately and he didn't understand it. She was developing strange abilities.

'Elton!' she piped up. 'Miss Hawthorne! It's all right! I think we're safe! I don't know how I know it… but I believe the yeti mean us no harm!'

The alpaca gave a guttural moan, as if he for one didn't believe a word of it.

'Then what are they doing, Ursula?' Miss Hawthorne asked, fascinated by the concrete girl's apparently mystical powers. She could feel the emanations even through the storm.

'They have been sent to help us,' Ursula gasped. 'They were sent to shepherd us to the monastery by our contact…' Ursula grinned at her friends. 'We've made it to safety!'

There was a warm welcome awaiting them at the monastery. It was an old Youth Hostel, with burning braziers lighting up the misty gloom outside and, as the small, tired party stood by the front porch, four giant yeti creatures reached up and removed their ferocious heads,

revealing the smiling faces of handsome and sweaty young monks.

‘Goodness me!’ Miss Hawthorne chuckled. ‘You strapping lads have saved our necks!’

‘We’d have found this place eventually,’ Elton grumbled.

The heavy front door opened suddenly and out darted a woman with straight, ash blond hair and a beaming smile. She was attired in layers of vaguely hippyish clothing, her wrists jangling with colourful jewellery as she fussed over the new arrivals, welcoming them excitedly. Her quickness belied her years. Elton realized she must have been in her sixties.

‘It really is you, my dear!’ Miss Hawthorne said, hugging the small woman. ‘How long is it since our paths last crossed on this earthly plane?’

Jo Jones shrugged happily. ‘Oh, don’t ask me. I’m no good with time. Early Nineties, perhaps? But never mind that, welcome! Come in, all of you, out of the cold!’ She asked the shaven-headed yeti to help her visitors inside and she nodded welcomingly at Elton, doing her best not to seem too surprised by Ursula’s unique physiognomy.

The alpaca reared up and made frightening noises of protest when the monks tried to lead it away.

‘Put him in the old stable block,’ Jo suggested. ‘He’ll be quite comfortable there.’

‘Do be careful with him,’ said Miss Hawthorne worriedly. ‘The dear creature doesn’t even belong to me. He’s the property of the couple next door.’

Jo patted her arm and led her indoors. ‘You told me quite a lot about this situation in your email, remember?’

‘My apologies, dear heart. My wits are rather scrambled and my memory is awful.’

Jo laughed. ‘Mine’s not so great these days either, but I think I’d remember an email headed, ‘Please help, I think next door’s alpaca is possessed by the devil.’’

In the spartan room they were allotted, Elton and Ursula managed to have a quick conference. 'Is that woman really who we thought she might be?' Ursula was propped up in an armchair while Elton lay full length on the rather hard single bed.

He nodded. 'I reckon so. Jo Grant-as-was. Assistant to the Doctor some time in the 1970s. She was there for some of the biggies. The Axons. The Autons. The plastic daffodils that asphyxiated all those people, including my Aunty Helen.'

'Wow,' Ursula smiled indulgently at her boyfriend's enthusiasm. Funny how his eagerness to find others whose lives had been touched by the Doctor hadn't abated one iota since the weird events of 2006. Whenever Elton seemed glum and out of sorts Ursula knew all she had to do was start talking about the Doctor. It would always cheer him up. Despite the discomfort of the past couple of days, she knew that Elton was delighted to have met Jo Jones.

'She knows Miss Hawthorne from the Devil's End affair,' Elton told Ursula. 'When the whole village was sealed off by a force field and there was talk of the devil being summoned up by the local vicar…'

Ursula rolled her eyes. 'The Seventies were a funny old time.' Then she said, 'Come on, then. Pick me up. I can smell dinner. Mushroom stroganoff, did they say?'

The monks were dressed much more casually, in shirts and jeans, as everyone gathered for supper. The food was delicious, but Elton regretted the lack of alcohol. He was gasping for something a bit stronger than elderflower cordial.

Eventually the older ladies at the table paused in their reminiscences about mutual friends and Jo started asking questions about the alpaca.

'It might be a thwarted spirit,' the White Witch mused, swallowing a chewy bit of rhubarb crumble. 'Or a mischievous imp of some kind.'

'But why would imps or spirits want to take on the form of an alpaca?' asked Jo.

Elton put in, 'Ah, well, that might be my fault, that…'

‘No one is to blame, dear boy,’ Miss Hawthorne admonished him, tapping his hand lightly with her custardy spoon.

‘You see, Jo,’ Elton said. ‘Ursula and I drove Miss Hawthorne back to her home because we thought there was clearly… um… something the matter with her…’

‘I was too blind and caught up in myself to see it,’ sighed Miss Hawthorne. ‘Luckily I had my two new friends with me. They could see that I had undoubtedly been possessed by a malign force.’

Ursula explained, ‘Being big fans of hers, we knew that she wasn’t quite her normal self.’

‘Anyhow,’ said Elton, keen to get back to his story. ‘Next morning, I’m having a fag in her garden and one minute she’s calling me in for tea and the next she’s striding towards me like a sleepwalker, with her green eyes blazing and her hands outstretched like… talons! And next thing I know she’s got me by the throat.’

Miss Hawthorne giggled (inappropriately, really, Ursula thought.) ‘I’m so embarrassed about this.’

‘I had to fight for my life,’ said Elton. ‘She had superhuman strength and I had to be quite rough with her. I sort of had to… *push* **her and all of a sudden she’s falling into the bushes between her garden and next door, sort of thing…’**

‘Think nothing of it,’ Miss Hawthorne exhorted him. ‘I’m sure I was being a brute!’

Jo was staring at them all. ‘And the alpaca..?’

‘She hit her head, didn’t she?’ Elton said. ‘Must have given the restless spirit a fright. It got knocked sideways, and flew straight into the mind of the nearest intelligent being. Which wasn’t *me***, luckily. It was the closest alpaca, who was eating a bit of the very same hedge.’**

‘I see…’ said Jo.

Miss Hawthorne finished her dessert with great éclat and dabbed her lips with a napkin. ‘So, Jo. Do you think this great guru of yours can help us with our woolly demon?’

They were ushered into the inner sanctum. Strictly speaking it was the TV room of the old Youth Hostel, but the monks didn't go in much for television ('Their minds are fixed on more celestial things,' Jo explained.)

It was a very gloomy room, misty with perfumy incense. There was an extremely old lady sitting on a beanbag, knitting something shapeless and bright green.

'Come closer,' Jo urged the visitors. 'She tends to speak very quietly…'

'Who is this venerable lady?' asked Miss Hawthorne, who was, for once, pleased not to be the most senior person in the room.

'We're not sure,' Jo hissed, reverentially. 'I was on a trip up the Himalayas when I found her, and she insisted that I brought her to North Wales. It was extraordinary, really, and she wasn't all that nice, but I felt I had to help her.'

Elton peered through the fog. 'She looks a bit like Cher.'

Suddenly, the very old lady was intoning: 'There are forces gathered around us.' She put down her knitting sharply. 'I have seen these forces from a long way off. And now they are here!' Her eyes flew open. They were blank and silver, which made Miss Hawthorne gasp.

'It's in the alpaca!' Elton burst out. 'That's where it is!'

Ursula shushed him. 'Let her speak. She can help us, I'm sure of it.'

Miss Hawthorne nodded solemnly. 'Yes, I sense this, too, Ursula. This woman is indeed a guru. She has great abilities on the astral plane. I feel like quite a novice, compared.'

The ancient woman – Cher, as Elton had mentally nicknamed her – was staring into Ursula's stone eyes now, betraying not the slightest hint of surprise. 'You have very special abilities, too, Ursula. You little suspect how gifted you are. Your mind hovers in the interstices of the organic and the mineral. Your human consciousness is expanding across the many dimensions…'

Ursula looked shocked. 'Is that what's happening to me..?'

Cher nodded solemnly.

'Look,' said Elton, who didn't like the sound of this one bit. 'Will you help us? Can we get on with things? Miss H here seemed to think you could perform a kind of exorcism on the alpaca…'

The venerable old lady closed her eyes, as if to summon up reserves of psychic energy. 'Indeed. Bring forth the… creature.'

It took some doing, getting the alpaca to enter the monastery. The monks had to bundle him through the kitchens and the living quarters, tempting him all the way with cat treats (which he took a surprising liking to.) Eventually the disgruntled beast was standing in the television room / inner sanctum and was spitting at everyone.

'Calm thyself,' Cher commanded him and, to everyone's astonishment, the alpaca did just that.

Elton gasped out loud as a tendril of pale light extruded itself from Cher's forehead and locked onto the eyes of the alpaca. They glowed with that now-familiar, nasty shade of green.

'Oh dear,' trembled Miss Hawthorne. 'What manner of spirit have I foolishly drawn into our realm?'

Jo said pluckily, 'Never mind. I'm sure it can all be sorted out…'

'What's Cher doing now?' Elton asked aloud, and they all looked at him in surprise.

'Sssh,' said Ursula. 'Something is happening…'

Indeed it was.

The alpaca opened its mouth, revealing uneven yellow teeth.

And then it noisily cleared its throat.

'I address myself to you, Earthlings…' it began, in a very imperious tone of voice. 'I have travelled vast distances through time and space to be among you all this evening.'

'Time and space!' hissed Miss Hawthorne. 'So it isn't an earthbound spirit…'

‘Who are you?’ asked Cher, in a very grand voice. ‘And why do you come here?’

‘A quest,’ said the alpaca hoarsely. ‘I have shed my mortal remains and transcended them, travelling the astral plane for those who can help me locate the being for whom I am searching…’

‘Oh yes?’ asked Cher.

‘And I have been led to this place. This strange little backwater.’

Elton felt stung by this, and wanted to stick up for his planet, but Ursula asked a question before he could say anything. ‘Who are you seeking?’

The alpaca ground his long teeth together. ‘I seek one who is known to each of you assembled here. He is a very old soul who has spent much time on this world of yours. He has spent time with each of you…’ The beast paused and ruminatively spat at Elton, who yelped. ‘I am a very old friend of his and I need his help, you see. I have used all my remaining mental energy to project myself into your dimension…’

Cher was frowning as she turned to look at her guests. ‘Does this gobbledygook mean anything to you? Or is it just random gubbins?’

Jo shook her head quickly. ‘No, no. This makes sense. Why, you see, there is *indeed* someone who connects all four of us..!’

They stared at each other and then back at Cher and the alpaca.

‘Is it the Doctor you’re looking for?’ Elton asked him.

‘Yes!’ bellowed the creature excitedly. ‘Only he can help me! Is he here? Can you summon him? Can you bring him here?’

Miss Hawthorne looked alarmed. ‘Now, look here, ye alien spirit, sir. We couldn’t summon up the Doctor even if we wanted to. Even if we had that ability, we wouldn’t do it willy-nilly for any old disembodied intelligence who asked..!’

‘Yes,’ said Jo. ‘We don’t even know who you are! I mean, do you even have a name..?’

The alpaca drew himself up to his full height and, with great dignity, told them: 'I am one of the Doctor's own people. I am one of the greatest of his kind. I am… Morbius.'

Later, as she watched Miss Hawthorne whipping up cocoa for them all, Jo said: 'I never heard the Doctor mention a Time Lord called Morbius…' She frowned. 'But then, he never really told me all that much about Gallifrey and all that jazz. He used to say it wasn't for human ears.'

'I'm still amazed to hear that he came from outer space!' Miss Hawthorne said, fishing marshmallows out of a packet. 'Fancy that! He was even more exotic than I imagined!'

Jo helped set the mugs out on a tray, chuckling at her friend.

Before they left the kitchen, Miss Hawthorne asked: 'Tell me, Jo. If you decided to help this Morbius person, would you be able to contact the Doctor? I mean, is it actually possible? I've no idea how old he is now, or if he's even on our planet…'

Jo smiled distantly. 'Well, usually I'd say no, it's impossible. But since it's you, I can tell you. I have this thing, this silly device. Like a toy, really. I always thought it was a joke. But it turned out the Doctor gives one of his 'TARDIS tuners' to most of his travelling companions. They get them as wedding gifts, or surprises under the Christmas tree years later, just to show that he's thinking of them…' She grinned ruefully, leading the way back to the living quarters.

'TARDIS Tuners?' frowned Miss Hawthorne. She walked behind Jo, who couldn't see that the old lady's eyes were glowing a faint green…

'It's like an old-fashioned transistor radio, really. I've never actually got it to work. I think it was a joke, to be honest. But I'd never go anywhere without it, mind you! I could be anywhere in the world and I'd have that daft transistor radio with me… It plays all the hits from 1974, but it's never tuned into the Doctor.'

'Fancy!' exclaimed Miss Hawthorne, and then they joined the others in a comfortable communal room, where the monks were gathered around Ursula's head, enthralled by tales of LINDA's investigations in recent years.

Elton came in from outside, smelling faintly of Alpaca spit. 'He won't stop whiffling on about the Doctor and what great friends they once were,' he grumbled. 'Though he won't tell me anything about Gallifrey. Says my human mind is too puny to comprehend. Huh! Anyway, I've fed him some cat food and left the light on in the stable.'

'Come and have some cocoa, dear boy,' Miss Hawthorne said. 'I even rustled up some marshmallows!'

Much later that night Elton found that he was restless on the single bed. He sat up and saw that Ursula was awake, too.

'There's something not right,' he told her.

'You're not kidding!'

'I mean, specifically with this Morbius bloke.'

'You've talked to him more than the rest of us,' Ursula said. 'You're in a better position to judge.'

'Exactly,' Elton pulled a face. 'And the way he was ranting and spitting and going on out there in the stable, he didn't seem like the kind of friend that the Doctor would have, do you know what I mean? Most people who claim to be his friend have been really lovely, haven't they? Like Miss Hawthorne and Jo…'

'You've got a point,' Ursula said. 'I'm not sure he's telling us the truth. Not that it matters anyway, because we couldn't contact the Doctor even if we tried, could we? I'm not sure he realizes yet how hopeless we are…'

Elton went over to sit with her on the armchair. 'Hopeless, love? What makes you say that? You feeling a bit gloomy?'

'Oh, just a bit. I keep having funny thoughts. You heard what that old mystic woman said about my mind…'

'Who, Cher?' Elton laughed. 'I wouldn't put too much faith what she says…'

It was at that moment they heard a heavy thunking noise in the corridor immediately outside their door. Instantly Elton leapt into action.

‘Just be careful..!’ Ursula cried after him, frustrated, as usual, that she couldn’t physically help at all.

Elton, meanwhile, had flung himself bodily at the intruder in the corridor. They both went down with a crash that brought the rest of the monastery running. The lights went on.

‘Miss Hawthorne!’

Elton blinked, amazed, and saw that he had clumsily rugby-tackled the elderly witch and she lay, somewhat crumpled, underneath him.

‘Oh, my dear…’ she said, sounding very wobbly.

Then Jo said, ‘Miss Hawthorne, why have you got my bag?’

There was a large and colourful carpet bag crushed underneath both Miss Hawthorne and Elton. ‘I-I don’t know…’ said the old lady.

Jo grabbed her bag and started rummaging throughit. She produced a strange, antiquated radio from inside. It was buzzing and all its dials were alight. ‘You’ve been messing about with my TARDIS Tuner!’

‘H-have I?’ stammered the White Witch.

They decided they must gather for a late night conference in the living room. While Elton was distracted lugging Ursula back downstairs and Jo was dashing back to her room to fetch her boots and poncho, nobody noticed Olive Hawthorne slipping away into the night.

The visitors looked at the monks.

Above the noise of the storm outside there could be heard the distant, throaty braying of an excited Alpaca.

‘Who let Morbius out?’ Elton cried.

‘What?’ Jo was struggling into her boots. ‘Where’s Miss Hawthorne gone?’

‘Surely she wouldn’t let the alpaca out of the stables?’ Ursula frowned.

‘She’s got my TARDIS Tuner again!’ Jo gasped. ‘What is she up

to?'

One of the monks came dashing into the room. 'The old witch has let the alpaca out and she appears to be hurrying into the blizzard, back up the mountain..!'

'What?' gasped Elton. 'What the hell is she playing at?'

'Don't you see?' Ursula shouted. 'She's still possessed! She's still under the control of Morbius after all!'

'And he's not such a good guy after all,' Jo muttered quickly. Then she told the monks they'd better get their yeti outfits on again. 'And the rest of us had better wrap up warm, too,' she added. 'If we're going up the mountain after them…'

'Leave it to us,' the monks begged them. 'We know the rocks round here. We can get after them and bring them back…'

Elton shook his head. 'We're coming too. All of us. We've got this far. We're going to save Miss Hawthorne from whatever's got into her. And her alpaca as well.'

It was a nightmarish climb back up the valley.

Visibility had seemed awful earlier, when they had clambered towards the monastery at tea time. But now it was full dark. These were the darkest hours before dawn and the snow was tumbling down with even greater ferocity.

With the yeti leading the way, thrusting flaming torches against the dark, Elton and Jo huddled close and tried their very best not to miss their footing and plummet to a grisly death down the ravine. Elton clutched Ursula's paving slab to his chest and Jo helped him as much as she could. She was muttering to herself about being a fool, about telling anyone about the TARDIS Tuner…

'Do you really think it might work?' Elton said. 'This tuner thing?'

'It's one of the Doctor's gizmos,' Jo said ruefully. 'Whatever it does, it's bound to go wrong and cause a whole lot of trouble. That's usually the way…'

The yeti roared and Elton was left wondering how much more

bizarre things might get. And somewhere, buried deep in his hopes at the back of his mind, he was wondering what it would be like if the Doctor did somehow arrive in time to save them all…

Hours seemed to pass and their strength was on the point of deserting the whole lot of them as they inched up the storm-beaten track. The alien force that had subsumed Miss Hawthorne's being's every fibre must have been tremendously strong. When she came into view, very near the top of the mountain, she was showing absolutely no sign of flagging. Neither did the alpaca, who was climbing beside her. They were mounting towards the blasted summit with astonishing agility.

'There's something flashing and winking in her hand, look,' Jo pointed out. 'That's the Tuner!'

'Faster!' Elton panted. 'We've got to… go faster… We've got to catch up with them…'

And at last – though it seemed to take up every drop of strength they had remaining to them – they reached the top of the mountain. It was a rather flat and slippery plateau.

Miss Hawthorne and the alpaca were waiting impatiently for them. The White Witch was twiddling furiously with the blinking dials and switches of Jo's machine.

'Keep the yeti back,' snarled the alpaca.

Jo nodded to her friendly monks, and they held back. She stepped forward. 'Miss Hawthorne… Olive… listen to me. Put that device down. You don't want to bring the Doctor here.'

'I don't?' asked Miss Hawthorne, looking confused.

'Morbius isn't his friend,' Jo said, keeping her voice calm. 'He's an awful person! He made you steal something precious out of my bag. He's got you doing things against your own will. Does that sound like a friend of the Doctor's to you?'

'I s-suppose not…' Miss Hawthorne said, looking sadly at the flashing lights of the Tuner.

'Don't listen to her,' snarled the alpaca. 'What does she know?

What does she know about the Doctor anyway? She's just some hopeless human being. Why would he ever have told her anything about his illustrious people? People like me?' The alpaca was sounding very pleased with himself. 'Now, call the Doctor here! And you will be richly rewarded for helping me. He will be delighted you have reunited him with one of his superior friends…'

Jo was just opening her mouth to give the alpaca a piece of her mind about the Doctor's so-called mysterious 'superiors' when suddenly Ursula started shouting.

Elton almost dropped her in surprise. 'What is it, love?' he hissed urgently.

'Take me to him!' Ursula bellowed, in a loud and resonant voice Elton had never heard her use before. 'Take me to Morbius! Let me deal with him!'

'I'm not sure that's such a good idea,' Elton said. He hugged the paving stone even closer to his chest.

'Just do it,' Ursula insisted. 'Please, Elton.'

Everyone was looking at Elton.

And he remembered what Cher had said, earlier that evening in the TV lounge. She had been talking about Ursula's funny spells she'd been having. She'd been talking about interstices and how Ursula had an expanding consciousness, hadn't she?

He hefted Ursula in his arms and went to stand beside Miss Hawthorne, at the very edge of the mountaintop, facing the alpaca of Morbius.

'What is this?' Morbius brayed, and spat at Elton. 'Why are you bringing your strange, stone-faced girlfriend to look at me?'

Ursula said, in her very calmest voice, 'I challenge you, Morbius. To a battle of minds!'

The alpaca's eyes bulged out. 'What? You? A mere… paving stone? Challenging Morbius? The most superior Time Lord who ever lived?' He laughed raucously, and spat into the precipice.

‘Oh, give it a go,’ said Ursula. ‘Indulge me!’

The alpaca narrowed his green-glowing eyes. ‘All right,’ he said, haughtily. ‘You’re on. Prepare to meet your doom.’

Afterwards, as they sat having a fry-up in the monastery, it was agreed all round that it was such a shame about the alpaca.

But there was nothing to be done about it. Now Miss Hawthorne would have to return to Devil’s End and tactfully inform her neighbours that not only had one of their livestock been possessed by an alien warlord, but it had fallen to its death down the side of the tallest mountain in North Wales.

But still, things could be worse.

It turned out the monks weren’t vegan after all, and they had a plentiful supply of sausage, eggs and bacon for breakfast.

Jo wasn’t too upset about the loss of her TARDIS Tuner. ‘It would have been just awful if had actually worked,’ she said. ‘I bet the Doctor would have been furious with me.’

Miss Hawthorne still looked rather shaken by the night’s adventures, though a mug of strong, sweet tea was going a long way to bucking up her spirits. ‘I do think it would have been lovely to see him again. But I feel most ashamed, Jo, at stealing from you like that. Even if I was under a malign influence at the time.’

‘Well, all’s well that ends well,’ shrugged Elton, biting heartily into his sausage sandwich.

At this point they were joined in the dining room by the diminutive guru who Elton had taken to calling Cher. She was in a tatty old bathrobe and had seemingly slept through all the disturbances of the night. When she had the whole thing explained to her she looked amazed. ‘It seems I was right about everything,’ she said, brightly.

‘I still feel bad that we lost the alpaca,’ Ursula frowned. Elton rubbed one of her corners to make her feel better.

‘Tell me,’ Olive Hawthorne asked Cher. ‘If you’re the spiritual mistress and the head of this monastery, my dear, does that make you a llama?’

Cher shuddered, peering into the teapot, to see if there was enough for one last cup. 'I suppose so. I always thought it was a very silly name.'

Miss Hawthorne giggled and covered her mouth. 'It's just, I've thought of a very good line with which to finish this story.'

Jo Jones rolled her eyes. 'Go on, then. Tell us!'

Miss Hawthorne made sure she had everyone's attention and then she said: 'Ahem. 'What a very sad day it is for alpacas,' said the llama sadly.''

Cher and all the others groaned.

'Is it time to go home again?' Ursula asked Elton.

'I reckon it is,' he grinned, and found himself wondering about these new powers his girlfriend was developing and what further adventures they might lead to next.

The Triplet Impertinence

Andrew Hunt

‘Do you ever wonder how Hugo is getting on ruling Jaconda?’ Peri asked the Doctor one day apropos of nothing. They were spending a bit of down time on the ‘pleasure planet’ Fiesta-95 having failed to find any adventures to be had there. Peri had been sunbathing for a couple of hours, drinking Margaritas and her mind was running along inebriated tracks.

The Doctor pushed his Carmen Miranda sunhat back and stared at her thoughtfully from under its brim. ‘I have never given it a moment’s consideration,’ he replied, ‘however since you mention it I will now do some wondering.’

There was silence from the Doctor’s sun lounger for a few seconds. Peri took a sip of her cocktail and her mind moved on to pondering the question of where the Doctor had acquired a pair of shorts and a hat as tasteless as his usual clothes. And did a pile of fruit, she wondered, however tropical, afford any protection at all from the baking sun? In front of her the tide was receding rapidly down the beach, leaving fish flopping around on the wet sand and crabs scuttling for cover under seaweed in an alarmed manner.

‘Why in all of time and space did the idiot decide to stay on Jaconda,’ the Doctor exclaimed. ‘And why did the Jacondans let him become their leader? And why did it take,’ he pulled a fob watch from his shorts pocket, ‘nearly nine months for the question to even occur to me? I have the distinct feeling that something fishy is afoot.’ A tropical gumblejack had slipped and slapped its way from the water and was gasping and bulging its eyes at him. The Doctor leaped to his feet, slipped the gumblejack into his pocket and started packing away the sun loungers, the parasol, the picnic hamper, the drinks cabinet, everything. ‘Come along, Peri,’ he said, whipping her towel out from under her. ‘No time for leisure. There is work to be done, for today we shall be revisiting my first and, dare I say it, greatest adventure!’

Moses Sylvest placed his cards firmly down on the green baize of the gaming table and stared coolly at his opponents, Sposes Sylvest and

Toses Sylvest.

‘I will see your fifty crowns and raise you fifty,’ he said. Moses had a face which was perfectly suited to 4-dimensional poker. He worked in the PR industry and his face did most of his work for him. It was a liar’s face.

Sposes stared him down. Looked deep into his brother’s eyes and found them so completely bereft of any hint of emotion that he had to suppress a shudder before he made his move.

‘I’m out,’ he said and threw his cards down.

‘Just you and me then, bro,’ Moses said. ‘Are those hands steady enough to steer a course through the sandbanks of high stakes?’

Toses sighed. ‘What does that even mean, brother? Sandbanks of high stakes? Shallow waters of stupidity, more like. I’m calling you out.’ He pushed a pile of crowns into the centre of the table. ‘What you got?’

Moses leaned back and turned his cards over. ‘Read them and weep. Read them and weep.’

Toses looked at the cards and laughed. ‘A two, a seven and a charging dog? You have nothing.’ He spread his cards out. ‘Two nines and a stinking lawn.’

A frown crossed Moses’ features briefly but then the cards started to interact at the quantum, multi-dimensional level and when time and space had folded back into their normal configuration, all that was left standing was the seven.

‘What in the name of..?’ Toses shot to his feet, kicking his chair out behind him. ‘That’s not right. Are you cheating again, brother?’

‘Them’s the breaks in 4D poker,’ Moses said smugly and reached forward to sweep the crowns towards himself. Toses’ hand lashed out and gripped hold of his wrist. Moses shook the hand off. ‘If you can’t take the heat, stay out of the supernova.’

None of the triplets really liked each other, and these games of poker were always just an excuse for one-upmanship. They had gone into different careers, at the advice of their psychotherapists, to stop

them comparing themselves to each other. It always ended badly. And they still did it. How much was Moses earning compared to Sposes? How many hours did Sposes spend on the Riviera-sim compared to Toses? How high could Toses jump compared to Moses? And, of course, who won the most money at 4D poker? Though this last one tended to even out over the long term, it was still a source of irritation to the short term losers.

Their mother poked her head round the door into the dimly illuminated den, filled with whisky fumes and cigar smoke. 'Are you boys playing nicely? I thought I heard raised voices.'

'Yes, mother,' they chorused, eliciting a smile from their doting parent.

'I've made cookies and milk,' she said. 'Would you like some?'

'Mother!' they protested. 'We don't eat cookies any more! And we've got our drinks! We aren't children!'

'Oh,' she said, a little sadly. 'Well, you'll always be children to me.' And then she ducked out of the doorway as Sposes threw a shoe at her.

'I need to move out,' Toses said to the others. 'We all need to move out.'

At that moment, a deep gravelly voice sounded out from the shadows in the corner of the room.

'Perhaps I can help you with that…?'

The Slugs came in the night, with a sound like glooping, and fed. Every morning the palace kitchen was covered in trails of slime, and the salad bar was decimated. The Emperor of Jaconda had had enough. He summoned his scientists and demanded a solution.

'What in space have you eggheads been doing all this time?' he asked angrily. 'I rubberstamped the Saline Precipitation Project years ago!' He pushed himself up from his slime-encrusted throne and slithered towards his minions. 'I want answers, dammit!'

The scientists twittered and their feathers bristled. They cowered before his steely gaze. They kowtowed before him. They did everything but give him what he wanted. So he went down to the Palace

Laboratories to see for himself just what they had been up to.

As the TARDIS approached Jaconda, it experienced turbulence which reminded the Doctor that at some point in the future he should maybe consider installing some kind of safety harnesses which could be attached to the console. As it was, he and Peri were thrown around like salt in a shaker.

'Yikes!' Peri exclaimed. 'What's happening, Doctor? I think I may be sick!'

The Doctor was always happy to hold Peri's hair out of her face when she was yawning down the Great White Telephone but he had warned her about all of those Margaritas and was unsympathetic.

'Get a grip, girl!' he shouted across the console room. 'There's some kind of wormholiness going on around here! But we will be down and safe and sound in just the blink of a cat's whisker!'

The familiar wheezing and groaning of materialisation echoed through the room and, as promised, the tossing and pitching of the floor subsided. Peri still felt a little green around the gills but the waves of nausea were receding and she grinned queasily at the Doctor.

'Let's go visit!'

'My name is…erm….well, let's just say that I am Professor Edgeworth,' the man in the corner of the room said. 'I realise that my sudden appearance may cause you some alarm…'

'No,' said Sposes, already levelling a time cone inverter at the mysterious and shady figure. Moses and Toses shrugged in agreement.

'…but I am, or was, a great friend of your grandfather and, indeed, of your father and mother….'

'They never mentioned a Professor Edgeworth,' Toses said. Moses and Sposes shook their heads.

'Regardless,' the figure said, sounding moderately annoyed. 'I am here to offer you employment and a chance to move out of your parents' house. The pay will be beyond your wildest dreams. Is it a deal?'

Edgeworth reached out and tried to shake Moses' hand. Moses recoiled.

'What are you doing, you old perv? Trying to palm a sedaspot on me!' He held the tiny red disc for his brothers to see, having snatched it out of Edgeworth's hand.

The old man blushed. 'No, no, no. It's mine! For my nerves! Space damn it! Why are you monozygotes always so bloody annoying? Do you want this job or not? I can promise you a luxury suite in a palace, all the weird bird-alien girls you could want, three billions crowns and domination by an evil slug man and possible certain death.'

'What was that last bit again?' asked Moses.

'Who cares?' said Sposes. 'It sounds like a sweet deal!'

'Domination!' shouted Toses exultantly, as Edgeworth activated his QE teleporter.

'Did you say something, oh mighty Emperor?' asked the first scientist.

The Emperor shook his head angrily. 'I was talking to myself, Egghead! Do not eavesdrop on your superior! But, since you mention it, the voice in my head was ranting at me to congratulate you on your work towards Gastropod Heaven, and the other voice in my head was wondering exactly how this wormhole technology was going to further the Saline Precipitation Project? Explain please?'

The Emperor slithered a little closer to the scientist and angled his head towards him. Sometimes, when the scientist was feeling a little tired, he had noticed that the Emperor looked a little bit like a man struggling with the urge to sprout tentacles from his head. But if he stared intently at the Emperor for too long, trying to establish whether this was an accurate impression, then the Emperor would get cross and threaten to send him into the tunnels underneath the palace. And nobody liked that. It was far too dark.

'Well, mighty one, the idea is that we create wormholes in the space-time continuum as you very sensibly suggested…'

'I did?' the Emperor asked.

‘Yes, oh mighty one. You were very insistent that we do away with all the cloud seeding technology that we originally devised and went entirely down the wormhole route.’

‘Ah,’ said the Emperor. ‘I suppose that if I suggested it I probably had my reasons. Maybe I was feeling homesick?’

There was no question that when the Emperor had originally decided to set himself up as the solitary white human overseeing the lives of the indigenous blackbird population he had not adequately foreseen the intense loneliness of command. He had just known that if he had taken the offered ride home he would be in a shedload of trouble and he liked an easy life surrounded by easily dominated sla….minio…grateful subjects.

‘Perhaps. So the plan, as we understood it when you sleepwalked in here and dictated it as if in a trance, was that we should create wormholes and link them to seas on other worlds. The wormholes would thereby act as conduits for salt water to be sprayed all over the planet and thereby create a form of saline precipitation thereby. As per your request.’

‘This sounds, if I may say so,’ said the Emperor, ‘like a ridiculously convoluted plan, but so long as it kind of works I am happy.’

‘Ah,’ said the scientist. ‘It doesn’t.’

‘What!’ bellowed the Emperor. His blazing rage pummelled the scientist psychically.

‘Mercy, oh mighty one! It doesn’t work yet, but we have recruited some help…’

Peri poked her head out of the TARDIS.

‘Bleaugh!’ she said. ‘This is not what I expected.’

The Doctor pushed by her and surveyed the surroundings. ‘What do you mean? This is exactly how I remember Jaconda. The grim, dark corridors, the trails of slime, the general air of decay and depression.’

‘But we left Hugo in charge,’ Peri protested. ‘And he was all…’ She did a wide-eyed cheesy grin and jazz hands. ‘He was like a showbiz,

glitzy space cop. He was Liberace with a laser. I kinda thought he might have, you know, tszuj-ed it up a bit.'

'Juj? Juj? Is that even a word?' The Doctor looked around more carefully. 'Though come to mention it, he doesn't seem to have exactly stamped his personality on the place.'

Peri grabbed the Doctor by the arm and pulled him along. 'C'mon, let's track him down and find out what the deal is.'

The Emperor looked at his new employees.

'Not more twins!' he objected. 'And this third chap looks awfully familiar.'

'Allow me to introduce Toses Sylvest the galactic expert on oceanography, and his brother Sposes Sylvest who is the leading intergalactic proponent of quantum entanglement wormholes, and their triplet Moses Sylvest, who works in PR.'

The Emperor globbered and oozed.

'I know you, you little creeps. Romulus and Remus Sylvest. You're the reason I ended up on this godforsaken hellhole.'

'Count the heads, slimeball,' Moses said. 'We are triplets!'

'You must have met our mother and father,' Sposes continued.

'Before mother had herself genetically modified to a different genotype.' Toses finished off.

'Your mother…?' the Emperor said, quelling a bilious wave of nausea. 'And father? Good grief.' He wondered which of them had chosen to become Romulette or Remy, just so that they wouldn't have to interact with somebody outside their little menage a deux. Now there was a twin dilemma.

'Between the three of them,' the scientist explained, 'they make a perfect team for your project. Toses can direct us to appropriately saline bodies of water and guide us as to the best position for Sposes to locate his wormhole to achieve maximally efficient drainage of the ocean.'

‘And what exactly am I here for?’ Moses asked.

The scientist shrugged. ‘We thought we might need a fairly hefty amount of spin to account for the sudden drop in water levels across the inhabited worlds of the galactic empire.’

From the door to the laboratory there came a slow handclap.

‘This is all very impressive,’ said the Doctor having caught the gist of the story as he sauntered in, ‘if a touch elaborate for a scheme that wouldn’t even work.’

Peri, who had followed the Doctor into the room, stopped in her tracks and gasped at the sight of the Emperor.

‘Hugo!’ she exclaimed. ‘What happened to you? You look like Jabba the Hutt!’

Hugo pouted and frowned. ‘What kind of a way is that to greet an old friend? I admit I may have gained a few pounds here and there, had a few more takeaways than I used to, but…’

‘But you were kinda buff. In a British way. What happened?’

Hugo looked like he was about to cry, his eyes screwed up and his face went blotchy.

‘Oh, Jeez, I’m sory,’ Peri said. ‘That was sorta insensitive.’

Hugo gurgled and lurched towards her.

‘Careful, Peri,’ the Doctor said. ‘There is more to this than meets the eye.’

A hideous transformation racked Hugo’s body and a ghastly voice emanated from his now ensluggified visage.

‘Quite correct, Doctor! It is I, Mestor! (gurgle) For years I have guided the actions of this simpleton. I have lain dormant in his brain steering him and educating him in matters of the slug. And now I think it is time for my plan to commence!’

Back on Fiesta-95 a few minutes later, Peri summed up for Hugo’s benefit. Hugo was still a little out of it, having only recently been exorcised of the spirit of Mestor, ruler of the gastropods, and having

even more recently been plied with drinks by Peri.

‘So, Mestor’s plan was to spread his eggs across the galaxy using the triplets’ wormhole technology. He was going to get rid of as much of the salt from the planets as possible by draining the oceans and then he was going to send his eggs through to destroy the remaining life and propagate his spawn. Neat, huh?

She paused for a moment and took a sip of her raspberry voxnic.

‘All I can say is that it was a good job the Doctor had that gumblejack in his pocket and that they are the most intensely salty fish in the entire universe.’

She drained the rest of her drink.

‘And only ever so slightly convenient that this was one of the first worlds that Mestor chose to invade and so the gumblejack was left high and dry for the Doctor to pick up. It’s kinda nice how things turn out sometimes.’

‘How will the Jacondans cope without me as their leader?’ Hugo asked. ‘I mean, I was pretty good at it. Even when I was being possessed by an insane slug monster. The trains ran on time and the indigenous population were ever so grateful to have somebody sensible telling them what to do. I can’t help feeling just a little bit responsible for them.’

‘This is going to be so cool,’ said Moses, leaning back on the three seater sofa they had installed in the Jacondan Throne Room.

Sposes was sulking a little because he’d wanted to sit in the middle. At least that’s what he wanted them to think. He could feel psychic tentacles pushing at the inside of his brain.

Toses snapped his fingers at the scientist.

‘Bring forth the weird bird-alien girls!’

And far across the galaxy, their parents looked down fondly at an additional monozygotic sibling. As Romulus and Remus they had always felt themselves to be an irrelevance in the universe, unnecessary to the plot of their own lives. But when they had become parents together they had found a new meaning in their lives.

The triplets had been something of a disappointment, they could see that now, and the oozing, squelching voice in their minds insisted that was the case. So when they brought their fourth child into the universe, they had subtly altered it from its otherwise identical siblings, gifting it a second X chromosome. They had found it difficult to come up with a name. Naming triplets had been a real quandary. But then it came to them.

'We shall call her Newbury,' they said, spookily in unison.

The Sylvest family will return in The Quadruple Bypass

Sweetie

Sarah Hadley

‘Okay, sweetie. You have a good night, and if you all need anything, just press the big red button and call. My name’s Katie and I’ll be here ‘til morning.’ The girl beamed a smile that started in her double chin and went all the way up to the dimples in her cheeks. She turned and, with a girlish little wave, closed the door gently behind her. It shut with a quiet but distinct *click.* For a moment, nobody moved.

Then the patient turned to look at her companion across the room. ‘If she calls me *sweetie* again, I shall make the ground run red with her blood.’

‘Well…’ The Doctor’s gaze drifted absently up toward the corner of the ceiling. ‘It is just possible you’re overreacting.’ He took the pillow he had made from his coat and adjusted it behind his head. ‘After all, she’s probably only trying to be your friend. Isn’t that right, K-9?’

The mobile computer whirred and sputtered, the metal antennae rotating on its head. ‘Recommend cessation of persuasive argument, Master. Probability of success measured at point zero zero zero one percent.’

‘Pah!’ said the Doctor. ‘Don’t be so negative.’

‘K-9 speaks the truth,’ Leela said confidently. ‘He knows that a warrior does not fall prey to honeyed words or childish deceptions.’ She tried to work her arms out from the bedsheet, struggling to untangle herself from the myriad of wires and cables that snaked in and out from under her gown. The diodes affixed to her skin were sticky and she could barely resist the urge to wrench them off.

Finally, with a huff, she sank down in the bed and glowered unhappily. ‘It is like my father’s trap for bark-dwellers. The more you fight, the more you weaken.’

She narrowed her eyes in suspicion. ‘I wonder what animals they trap for food in this place.’

‘Mmm,’ the Doctor nodded, making the face that reminded Leela of a fish surprised to discover dry land. ‘Well, they are Americans, but I don’t think even their dietary habits are quite as crude as you’re thinking.’ He took a little white paper bag out of his waistcoat pocket. ‘You should try handing these round. All the girls on this floor are very fond of toffee. Mrs. Arbogast next door told me all about her son. And her grandson. And her great-grandson. And his girlfriend. And their baby. And…’ His eyes widened. ‘I don’t suppose it was really the toffee she was interested in, was it?’

‘You are wise to listen to the words of tribe elders,’ Leela assured him. ‘I do not believe anyone listens to them here. I do not believe they listen at all, they are so busy speaking their own meaningless rituals.’ She shoved a pillow behind her back and pulled the covers up to her chin: first one blanket, then a second, a third, and a fourth. ‘It is good that they have brought me many warm skins. I do not feel the need to kill any of them yet.’

The Doctor reached down and pressed a button on the side of his recliner. A little footstool popped out as an extension at the base of the chair. ‘You should really try lying down, you know. Get some rest. You’ve had an experience today.’

‘No, Doctor. I’ve had my appendix removed.’

‘That too, Leela, that too. Go to sleep.’

Leela grumbled. ‘If we are both asleep, Cryuni and her demons may come in the night and steal our souls.’

‘K-9 will look out for us. Isn’t that right, K-9? You’ll let us know if any demons say ‘boo.’ Just don’t shoot the nice girl from phlebotomy, eh? Her name is Becky and she’s only trying to make ends meet.’

The metal antennae revolved. K-9 wagged its tail in a way that, for a regular dog, could only be described as eager to please. ‘Information catalogued, Master. Initiating stealth mode. Twenty-first century subroutine: if this unit is questioned by humans, I am ‘the-latest-thing-from-Japan.’’

‘Excellent, K-9,’ said the Doctor, stretching out. He pulled his hat down over his face and crossed one leg over the other. ‘Now you be a good girl and get forty winks, Leela. I’m just going to rest my eyes for

a moment.'

Leela watched as he fell immediately and thoroughly asleep. Within a minute he was snoring with some intensity from under the broad felt brim of his hat. K-9 took up a position near the soles of its master's feet and, powering down to economise battery usage, allowed its metal head to droop.

Slowly but inevitably, Leela felt herself beginning to nod off. She fought it at first, but the stress of the day and the remaining effects of anaesthesia quietly pulled her further and further into the arms of unconsciousness. Eventually, still hunched up in a sit``ting position, she let the tension out of her limbs and allowed herself to drift quietly into a deep, dreamless sleep.

She still had one eye open – just slightly.

In my tribe, we have a custom. A hunter always keeps one eye open to see the approach of Death. Death comes in many forms and cannot be anticipated. Sometimes, it is the fire, spreading from tree to tree; sometimes, it is the horda, creeping underfoot; sometimes it is just the will of the gods. It is not for a hunter to know how she will die, but a true hunter meets Death straight on and does not back away from the encounter.

I have thought I would meet Death many times now, and I cannot say I was unafraid, but I did not flinch or flee or cry. It was one such time when I felt the burning pain inside of me, and the Doctor sat me down upon the TARDIS floor. He tried to laugh and joke in the way that I have seen many times, but I knew that he was afraid, and it made me fear, too. At first I begged him to kill me, so that I would not die weak and infirm, but he told me he could take me to a place of healing. Then I had only to wait, but it was a wait that felt as long as a nine-day. My mind always returned to the pain, and with the pain, the fear. I tried to cast the fear from my mind by counting the stitches in the Doctor's scarf, but it did not help. And so it went on until the Doctor brought me to the temple he calls Hospital.

In Hospital, there are many priests. They are also called doctor, which is confusing, especially when the Doctor says something about being the 'one and only.' How can he be the only one when there are so many? I do not think these other men and women are doctor as they are nothing like him; I think they are merely playing some kind of ritual, like a pretend-game for children. They speak to each other in words of the Tesh and treat

the wounded and dying like tiny babes. It is a very strange tribe who live in Hospital.

The priests helped me on to a bed and performed strange chants and dances, many of which I believe invoked Science. I learned quickly why the Doctor had brought me here; these priests have many Tesh machines, and the Doctor is fond of machines that do useless things. They have machines that tell you if you are breathing and if your heart beats and how-many-beans-make-five. I did not like to tell them that my tribe could know these things without machines. I did not like to tell them their rituals were foolish, and I did not wish to make the Doctor unhappy. I let them finish their chanting and waited for the healing to begin.

It took four of them to hold me down and stick the tiny blade into my arm. I struggled and bit and kicked, as any good hunter would do when attacked by an enemy. The Doctor was shouting and two of the priests were muttering arcane curses. Soon, however, I began to feel a lightness in my head, and the pain inside of me drifted away. I found myself looking at the Doctor and his bright, gleaming smile. The smile seemed to get bigger and bigger and wider and wider until it was all I could see and after that, I thought that I must surely be among my ancestors.

When I woke up, the Doctor congratulated me and offered me something he called a 'pop-sickle.' It tasted red and sweet and cold.

The Doctor says I will be fine now, but I am still afraid. Only the child and the fool do not fear, yet I have found many new reasons for it. Sometimes I worry that the pain will come back. Sometimes I worry that my body will split open like a fruit where I have been 'stitched up.' Sometimes I worry that when it does come my time to meet Death, the Doctor will not be able to return my body to the tribe of the Sevateem for the usual rituals. They will not perform the count-down invocation to Livtoff, the shepherd of the dead. They will not they play the drums of boo-straw-kets.

Then I remember that It is only my body. My spirit will be far away among the gods. It does not matter, then, when it is that I will finally face Death. I believe that my mother and my mother's mother will be proud and that, when my time does come, my ancestors will greet me as a warrior and say I have done well.

'Good morning! Time to wake up, Miss Leela.' The light flared on and the high-pitched voice, radiating sunshine, cut across the cool,

relaxing fog of Leela's unconscious mind.

Leela resisted the urge to reach up and snap the nurse's neck.

Instead, she kept her eyes shut and tried to block it out, to no avail. 'You know,' the voice trilled, 'I meant to tell you last night that I am just *so* in *awe* of you and your muscles. Do you lift weights? I keep trying to make myself go to the gym, but it's just so hard when you work doubles, and then my boyfriend's only at home with Sydney during the day…'

'May the gods smite you for jabbering like a tree-beast,' Leela muttered. She opened her eyes cautiously against the light. The girl's form came slowly into focus; she was short, fat and blond, with a puffy, red face and little beady eyes that Leela did not like. She also had what might be the most irritating laugh Leela had ever heard; it reminded her of K-9 when he malfunctioned, and it punctuated every second or third sentence the girl spoke.

It occurred to Leela that this girl was no hunter. Nor was she a priest, nor even a priest-in-training. Leela had met girls like this within her own tribe. They were not wise in the ways of the world, and they often became the caretakers of the young before they had babes of their own. In case of a horda attack, they had to be protected by the hunters. They did not have the skills to protect themselves, and so, quite often, they died.

'Hey there, sweetie,' said the nurse. 'You feeling okay this morning?'

Leela coughed experimentally. She was beginning to feel bad for her behaviour to the nurse, but she didn't want to admit it. Better to try and cover it up. 'I was dreaming a curious dream,' she lied awkwardly. 'There were many strange beasts in it.' She tried desperately to think of animals the Doctor had told her she could find on Earth. 'There were…jabberwocks, and…manticores. And pink elephants. Like… what you see at the zoo.' She had no idea where this 'zoo' was, but the Doctor had promised to take her there. It must be a mighty hunting ground.

'That'll be the anaesthesia,' the nurse smiled. She finished recording the readings from the heart monitor and set her clipboard down at the

end of Leela's bed. Carefully, she attended to all of her patient's little morning needs: she brought Leela her toothbrush and toothpaste, which Leela promptly attempted to eat; she put fresh ice water in her carafe; she emptied her bedpan. Finally, after she set Leela's breakfast tray in front of her, she turned to the window. 'Want to see outside?' When Leela didn't respond, she opened the blinds anyway. 'It's so nice and sunny, but there's a little breeze. Maybe your husband will take you out for a walk if you're feeling strong enough.'

'My husband?' Leela, who was just becoming acquainted with the small joy of French toast, nearly gagged. 'The Doctor is not my husband. The Doctor is my teacher. He is a great man who knows many things.'

The nurse gave her a look. 'My momma always told me to be careful with older men.'

'I am very careful,' Leela said firmly. 'I am wise in the ways of the knife, and the hook, and the janis thorn.'

'Oh, you like hunting and fishing?' The nurse was going over her clipboard again, making sure she hadn't missed anything. 'That's fun. You seem like a real outdoorsy type. My daddy used to take us squirrel hunting when I was little. We had a real good time, but I never was much of anything at it. Daddy used to say the only thing I knew how to hunt was a Big Mac.' She laughed again – a loud laugh, lacking in self-awareness. 'You in any pain, honey?'

Leela considered. There were many answers to this question. There was, for instance, the pain of listening to this nurse and her prattling words. There was the pain of the many small, constant mechanical noises that came from the metal tree at Leela's bedside. There was the pain of hunger, which was beginning to diminish. There was the pain of the morning sun coming through the window. In these and other ways, Leela experienced pain, but she knew that the nurse was asking about the pain from where her appendix had been.

She carefully recited the words the Doctor had given her. 'I feel like a million bucks,' she said.

The nurse beamed. 'That's just great, sweetie. We'll have you out of here in no time.' And with that, she was gone.

Leela turned to question K-9. 'I do not understand these words, K-9,' she said. 'Why do I compare myself to a large number of wood-dwelling animals?'

Suddenly, before she could finish her train of thought, there was a loud alarm from the corridor. It reminded Leela of the bell that sometimes went off inside the TARDIS. After a few repetitions, it was replaced by the flat tones of a pre-recorded voice. 'Paging Dr. Pyro,' it said. 'Third floor, Dr. Pyro.'

Leela tensed. She felt tiny, minute vibrations as her bed shook, ever so slightly. Under the sound of increasing activity outside of her room she could just make out a dull, thudding noise.

'*Fourth* **floor, Dr. Pyro,' the artificial voice revised itself. 'Please make your way to the fourth floor immediately.'**

In another moment, to Leela's considerable surprise, the door flew open and a mass of spackled grey and coloured stripes swept in. It collapsed noisily into a pile in the recliner across the room. 'Hello!' the Doctor cried, pulling off his hat and waving it at Leela. 'Nice weather we're having, eh? Bit hot.' He reached down to examine one of the ends of his scarf, which was clearly singed. He blew on it, experimentally, as if that would help.

'Where have you been?' asked Leela. She had a sudden thought. 'Are you being summoned by the Evil One?'

'Me? Oh, no. Dr. Pyro's the *fire.*' **The Doctor beamed. 'But let's talk about you. Did you sleep well? Feeling rested? Fired up? Ready to go?'**

Leela considered. In her tribe, anything more than a simple cooking fire would cause great concern; the huts of the Sevateem could be set alight by untended embers, and it was possible that tongues of flame could reach to catch the trees in their blaze. Many mothers and children had been lost to fire. Yet she was aware that the Doctor had what he called *tendencies.* **Among these, she knew, was one to leave a certain amount of destruction in his wake. She decided that if the Doctor had created fire, he must surely have a reason.**

She felt, rather than heard, another far-away *boom***. The look on the Doctor's face seemed to be trying to ignore it.**

Leela set her jaw. 'You abandoned me,' she accused in a petulant tone. 'While you were…' She considered. 'While you were *playing*, I was vulnerable to attack from unknown enemies.'

'Well…' The Doctor looked a little guilty. 'I suppose that's true, but after all, K-9…'

'K-9 is a fine warrior, but he did not protect me from the demons who entered this hut. They collected my bodily fluids and made many high-pitched noises in attempts to steal my soul.' Leela snorted contemptuously at the canine computer. 'K-9 is too trusting. He wags his tail when anyone pats him on the head and calls him 'good dog.''

'Negative, Mistress. High residual level of narcotics found in your bloodstream indicate increased likelihood of hallucination. No supernatural entity entered this room. Your visits were routine medical procedures. The first human female entered to begin administration of an intravenous antibiotic at one-oh-seven A.M –'

'You will be haunted by three spirits,'' the Doctor intoned. He appeared to be staring into the middle distance. ''Expect the first when the bell tolls one.'' He paused and considered, his gaze returning to Leela. 'William Hope Hodgson. Nice man. Terrible teeth.'

Leela flounced childishly back to cover her face in her pillows. 'I should have killed them all,' she growled. 'I should have killed them all with my knife.' 'I'm glad you didn't,' said the Doctor. He was at her window now, gazing outside as if the view of a car park was the most interesting sight in the world. 'It's a beautiful day, and I would hate to have to surrender you to the authorities. After all, I signed paperwork attesting to your good nature.

'All right, I'm sorry,' he said, with a grin that indicated he was no such thing. 'I'm terribly sorry, only I do get bored of sitting around. Nothing can happen here; you're perfectly safe. I wouldn't have brought you somewhere that wasn't perfectly safe.'

Leela glared at him over the edge of the pillow. She said nothing.

'Yes, yes, I know. Sometimes I bring you somewhere that isn't safe.' The grin disappeared. For a few seconds there was silence as the two of them stared at each other, unmoving. Then, finally, the Doctor sighed. He reached inside his coat and dropped a brown paper bag into

Leela's lap. 'All right, up and at 'em, savage. Chop chop.'

Leela slowly emerged from the pillow and set it to one side. She raised herself up on her elbows and prodded at the bag. 'What is it?'

'It's a cranberry orange muffin. Pleasant to eat, full of carbohydrates, and roughly the size of your head.' The Doctor made a face. 'Just don't tell matron, eh?'

Leela tore into the plastic bag and began shovelling huge handfuls of sticky-sweet baked good into her mouth.

'Careful, careful,' warned the Doctor. 'Don't get too excited. You'll set off that heart monitor, and then where will we be? I'm sure you've already had a very nice breakfast tray regardless. Full of eggs and bacon and…other things. American things. Hot dogs. Peanut butter. Grits.'

Leela beamed happily. 'I like the food here. I think it is wonderful.' She finished the last of her muffin and began to search the bedclothes for crumbs. When she found them, she licked the end of one finger and used it to pick them up. After the fifth or sixth crumb she was suddenly aware that the Doctor had gone very quiet, and she paused, finger halfway to her mouth. She looked up to see the Doctor sitting back in his recliner, a wide, gleaming grin spread across his face.

She calmly finished eating the crumbs. 'I am making preparations to forgive you,' she said.

'That's good, Leela, that's very good,' he said. 'You go right ahead. Then we'll get a nurse in here to give you a bath…' The hint of a glare returned. '…Or possibly not, and we'll all go down and play bingo on the children's floor.' He turned to look at his other companion. 'How about it, eh, K-9? Want to make some new friends?'

'Very good, Master.'

There was another sudden, whooping alarm out in the corridor. The recorded voice returned. 'Paging Dr. Armstrong,' it said. 'Dr. Armstrong to the seventh floor.' There was another hurried shuffle of feet from somewhere outside the door.

'Ah,' said the Doctor. 'That'll be the other little thing I need to take

care of. Now, you be a good girl, do everything the nurses tell you, and I'll just be a jiffy.' He bundled himself out of the recliner and went for the door. Just as he had his hand on the door handle, he turned back. The grin had disappeared. 'I know you're worried,' he said, 'but it's going to be all right. You'll be fine, you must believe me.' He looked her directly in the eye. 'I promise you it will be all right.'

Leela looked at him. For the first time, she allowed the anxiety into her face. It crept in the red corners of her eyes, from where she fought back tears in the night, and it revealed itself in her tight, brittle smile. 'It will be all right,' she repeated, though she cast her eyes down as she said it.

The Doctor pointed decisively at K-9. 'K-9, guard the approaches. Leela…' He shoved a hand back into his coat. 'Here, hang on to this. It'll make you feel better.' He took something out of his pocket and aimed it at her with an underhand toss. It landed in her lap and rolled toward the edge of the bed, but she caught it before it went over. It was his sonic screwdriver.

When she looked up, he had gone.

A warrior of the Sevateem does not fear pain or discomfort. To do so is to dishonour and distrust the gods. I remember the first time I was stung by a web-spinner, when I was a child of only four summers. I cried and cried and entreated my father to suck the venom from my wound. He turned his back to me, and my mother returned to her work within the hut. I learned to control my fear and keep my face still, like the stone, until the pain passed. In this way, I believed the gods would see my courage and know that I was a true hunter.

A hunter does not admit when they are vulnerable, and a potential enemy, no matter how weak in appearance, should never be given the higher ground. In my time with the Doctor, I have met many strange enemies that make others afraid. I have seen women faint and men run in terror from the creatures who set themselves against us. These monsters do not make me fear any more than I now fear the web-spinner; they are only monsters, and they can be fought with a knife.

It is not Death that makes me truly afraid. It is weakness.

In my tribe, there was once an old man of forty summers who could no

longer hunt for himself. His body was thin and grey and his hands shook when he went to reach for his bowl. We treated him as an honoured elder. The women of the tribe tanned hides and stitched skins for him to stay warm in the winter, and every day we young hunters brought him meat and listened to the stories of the many fine hunts he had led. We heard how he shot two flying animals from the sky with the same arrow, and how he caught bark-dwellers with his bare hands. My father said that these were only stories, and that the gods were punishing his body for the lies of his mouth, but we did not care. They were good stories and they made us stronger and braver in our own hunting.

When Cryuni finally came for the old man's soul, the young hunters of my tribe joined together to perform a ritual. We built a fire outside his hut, and we sat around it in a circle. One by one we took our turns reciting the stories he had told us – stories of great cunning and skill that we planned to tell our own children one day. We laughed and clapped our hands as we spoke his life into the fire, and the fire took his stories and spread them into the air, to be part of the trees and the rocks and the sky.

It has been many nine-days since I was with my tribe; I stopped counting them long ago. I have learned much since then. As I sit in this strange temple, I realize: the old man was not weak. He gave us his strength when he could not use it anymore, and we honoured him for it.

The Doctor says I will be all right, but he is not sure. No one can ever be sure. Death can come any day. If it comes for me tonight, I will show myself a true hunter. I will not be weak.

Great Xoanon, help me not to be weak.

'Hey, sweetie, how's it going? You doing okay?'

Night had fallen, but the blinds to Leela's window remained open. She hadn't even noticed the nurse come in. She sat cross-legged on the edge of her bed, watching the pale orange moon outside and thinking. A child's lollipop was stuck absent-mindedly in the corner of her mouth.

She pulled it out and examined it. It was bright blue, which she had decided, given the option, was much the best color for a lollipop to be. Leela poked out her tongue at her half-reflection in the window. It was blue, too, which pleased her. 'It is a clear night with a warm moon,'

she said. 'Where I come from, this would be a time for drums, songs and celebration.'

The nurse looked impressed. 'Oh, you do folk singing?'

Leela smiled with satisfaction. 'As a child, I sang with my mother on many celebration days.'

'That's great.' The nurse sighed wistfully. 'I wanted to take singing lessons for a while. I used to sing at church with my momma too, but I never did join the choir. Daddy told me it would be vain and selfish to put myself on display like that.'

'It is not selfish to praise your gods with song,' Leela said. 'Still, you have a fine role to play in your tribe; you are a healer. That is important.'

'Oh, I never planned to be a nurse,' said the girl. She sat down at the other end of the bed, careful not to invade Leela's personal space. 'It's just what the girls do in my family. Momma was a nurse. So was my granny. Both of my aunts on my daddy's side, too. When I got out of high school it just seemed like the thing to do.' She wrapped her arms around her clipboard. 'My boyfriend keeps telling me I should stay home with Sydney, but I don't want to give this job up now I've finally made it.'

'Sydney is your child?'

The nurse laughed. 'Sydney was our happy accident.'

Leela turned to size the girl up. She was only a little bit younger than Leela herself, the hunter realized, though the redness of her face made her look older. No, she was not a hunter, it was true; her reflexes were not quick, and her weight made her move slowly. Leela noticed, however, that she was extremely careful in her tasks; she did not rush through them, and her measurements were precise. She had patience and kindness, and these, Leela reflected, were skills of another kind.

'I think you will be a very good healer,' she said, finally. 'You have many challenges, but you do not show your fear.'

The nurse smiled. 'You're pretty good at it yourself.'

Leela nodded quietly. 'I have never been in Hospital before. Its

rituals are strange to me.' She took the sonic screwdriver from where she kept it hidden under pillow. 'The Doctor gave me his screwdriver to keep as a talisman. It is a good tool, but there is nothing to fix. There is only waiting. I do not like to wait.'

'Everyone feels that way in the hospital.' The nurse reached over and took a brush from the shelf near Leela's bed. 'You know what my momma used to do when I was afraid? She would brush my hair and sing me a lullaby. You want me to brush your hair?'

Leela looked at her for a moment, unsure what to do. Then, as if releasing a great weight, she clambered over to sit next to the nurse. She saw their contrasting reflections in the window: one nut-brown, one pale as weathered stone. One agile and muscular, one built for comfort. Both unsure of their futures but both dedicated to their chosen roles.

'Sing me a song of your gods, Kay-tee,' said the hunter. 'Sing me a song that will give me strength.'

The nurse ran the brush lightly through Leela's hair. 'Okay, sweetie,' she said. 'Okay.'

The Blurred Man

Elton Townend Jones

On an icy, sparkling morning in what was clearly the British countryside, I stepped from the TARDIS into deep snow.

Locking the doors, the Doctor joined me. Pointing at my bare, pink legs he laughed before ploughing off, in fur coat and wellies, towards a dark, bare wood.

'D'ye know where we are, then?' I asked, my breath forming clouds.

'Of course I do, Jamie,' he said, dismayed that I should question his navigational skill. 'This is Norfolk. Mid-twenty-first century.'

I took him at his word. 'And we're here why?'

He pointed upwards. 'Because They want us to be.'

'Why's that then?' I asked.

'Usual sort of thing. Someone mucking about with their temporal monopoly. Though quite why Norfolk has them in a tizzy I've no idea.'

'And They want you to stop whoever's doing the mucking about?'

He sighed. 'As much as it pains me to stamp on the creative butterfly, yes.'

I thought quietly as we skirted the skeletal trees.

'What?' asked the Doctor.

'Eh?' I asked, confused.

'Jamie,' he said, halting abruptly. 'That brain of yours is ticking away like an impatient time bomb. You want to know why I don't just walk away and leave them to it. Am I right?'

He was a canny wee fellow.

'Well,' he said, steepling two fingers of one hand against the palm of

the other, 'as you know, these occasional… assignments… allow you and I to roam the temporal cosmos with impunity. It's the price we pay, Jamie.'

'Aye, but supposing you *could* walk away, would you?'

He glanced sheepishly at the sky.

I wagged a finger at him. 'You know what curiosity did.'

'No, Jamie, that was Schröedinger,' he replied, though I'm not entirely sure what he meant. 'But yes, I am curious. This is what you might call an 'extra-historical' situation. Time experiments weren't uncommon in this period, but never anything this significant.'

'Perhaps your historians missed it?' I suggested.

'Jamie,' he said seriously, 'had time travel been developed in twenty-first century Norfolk, I rather think the Time Lords might just have got wind of it, don't you?'

'Hang on. I thought we were here because they had. Either it happened or it didn't?'

'Both,' he replied. 'And neither. I'll explain as we go.'

'Imagine you're a rail commuter. Every day you board a carriage and go to work. Today, for no reason discernible to you, you board carriage five. For your part, this is an entirely random action. Tomorrow you might board carriage three. You never notice the number; you don't care. Each day seems like any other. Therefore, what you've failed to noticed is that space-time events are constantly occurring around you, and apparently random factors have set themselves into the wobbly jelly of history. Because nothing is random, Jamie: everything is causally bound. You're in carriage five because the driver overshot the platform slightly, because he was tired, because his eight-year-old daughter was up all night with nightmares, because two years ago her mother died in a traffic accident, because a motorist was drunk, because so on and so forth. And if the 'random' boarding of carriage five can be unthreaded into the past like this, then what threads will spin from it, into the future? This is what I mean when I talk about the web of time. Trouble is, once you've grasped the concept, it becomes worryingly easy to assume that all your actions are

pre-determined. Ah, we've arrived.'

We'd turned a corner on the wintry woodland to face the dark ruins of a castle.

'Will ye look at the size of that?'

This was my habitual contribution to any brand new escapade. Normally the Doctor would offer a comforting response. Today he was having none of it.

'You are paying attention, aren't you, Jamie?'

'Och! D'ye even have to ask? I might not be the sharpest…'

'Dirk in the sock?' asked the Doctor, with an impish grin.

'Very funny.'

'So where was I?'

''Once we've grasped the concept of a web in time…''

'Of time,' he corrected.

''…It becomes worryingly easy to assume that all our actions are pre-determined.''

The Doctor gasped. 'James Robert Macrimmon! Shall wonders never cease?'

'Aye, well, I picked up the words all right, but I don't have a clue what you're rattling on about.'

I trudged towards the slumped castle.

''Rattling on?'' asked the Doctor.

He appeared in front of me just as I was about to knock upon a great weathered door.

'What do you know about free will?' he asked.

'Never heard of him,' I admitted.

The Doctor winced. 'It's a philosophical position, Jamie. It suggests

we can mentally access possible futures – Action A or Action B – and choose between them to manifest a desired outcome.'

'Sounds all right,' I said.

'Oh no, it's quite unacceptable, and this is down to the illusion of choice.'

'Can I help you?' asked a warm voice.

The Doctor spun around like he'd been booted up the backside.

In the now open doorway stood a tall, broad fellow with a mop of wild, grey hair. His twinkling eyes and carpet slippers suggested he was both friendly and harmless.

'Thank goodness!' said the Doctor, suddenly acting breathless. 'Sorry to trouble you, Mister, ah…'

'Professor,' responded the man, looking us over with evident confusion.

'Professor!' cried the Doctor, shaking his hands and winking at me. 'I was caught out by the snow yesterday and managed to get myself dreadfully lost.'

'Oh dear,' muttered the Professor.

I was about to add myself to the Doctor's subterfuge, when he kicked me slyly in the shin.

'Having spent the night in your wood,' he pressed, fixing the Professor with puppy-dog eyes, 'I wondered if I might trouble you for a glance at a map and a cup of something warm?'

I'd like to say that this was when the Professor let us in, but if I'm honest, we were already through the door and backing him along a narrow passage towards the happy sound of a whistling kettle.

The castle had long since fallen into disrepair and was now being used by the Professor in discreet pockets, partitioned by plastic sheets on wooden frames.

'All that's left of the family pile,' he said, fussing around a teapot in his makeshift living quarters.

As we warmed our hands by the stove, the Doctor eyed some hand-written papers spread across a table.

'Nice place,' I said, affording him more reading time.

'It was boarded up for years,' said the Professor, laying out cups. 'When I returned here to work, it was a devil to get clean. All sorts of mess.' He poured the tea and gave us both a cup. 'No milk or sugar, sorry.'

'Thank you,' said the Doctor, 'Professor, ah, Blinovitch, isn't it?'

This astonished me. Had the Doctor known the man's name all along or had he just read it in his notes?

'Oh,' he said, bowing a little. 'John Smith.'

'Jamie McCrimmon,' I offered.

The Professor coughed. 'Please, call me Ronnie. You chaps must be famished. Sandwiches?'

This was more like it.

'Cheese or ham?' he asked.

The Doctor clapped. 'A choice! Excuse us, Professor; we were putting the world to rights just now. So, Jamie: you're offered a choice in what we call the present. The outcome of which lies ahead, in the future. Cheese or ham?'

I chose ham.

'And now, one of the futures you were asked to choose between has become the present.'

'Ham it is,' said Ronnie.

'And,' continued the Doctor, 'as the present becomes the past, your choice, is etched in time, immutable. But genuine free will would mean that you *did* choose ham and *could also* have chosen cheese.'

I was none the wiser.

'Don't you see? 'Did' refers to a now actual event – a temporal fact

– and 'could' refers to an option offered but not taken – a temporal fiction. This is how time works.'

Ronnie looked at him curiously.

'When Jamie chose ham, Professor, could he ever have done otherwise? Before the choice was made, it seemed so, but now his choice has become a matter of historical fact, we know he was always going to choose ham.'

'Ask me again,' I said. 'I'll pick cheese.'

The Doctor smiled. 'That would only prove that Highland legs are hollow as well as hairy. You couldn't have chosen otherwise because your existence is confined to a single temporal continuum. Before William conquered Britain in 1066, he would have made a choice: invade or not invade? Action A or Action B? Cheese or ham? But what he didn't know before he made his decision was that the historians of his future recorded that he chose Action A. The web of time was just waiting for him to spin that choice into being. But sometimes that's not enough. Or, to put it another way, what exactly are you working on, Professor?'

'I beg your pardon, Mister Smith?' asked Ronnie, handing me a sandwich.

'I'm just a traveller,' said the Doctor, 'but Jamie here is from the village, where they're very concerned about the power fluctuations. And it's 'Doctor', by the way.'

I cleared my throat.

'What's going on?' asked Ronnie nervously.

The Doctor nodded at the Professor's papers. 'Solid light mapping? Bubble engrams? You're obviously a pioneer, but you're frightening the neighbours. Now, if you were to let me take a quick look, I'm sure I could lay their fears to rest.'

Ronnie shifted uncomfortably.

'Please,' said the Doctor, fixing Ronnie with deep, unfathomable eyes.

The castle hall was vast and impressive. Daylight shone through stained glass windows, painting everything in rainbows. It felt strangely sacred.

The Doctor sniffed the air. 'Copper,' he muttered.

I was transfixed by a motionless blur that stood in the centre of the room, surrounded by rigs of technology. Cameras whirred and clicked, monitoring the weird shape with curious eyes.

Squinting, I realised it was a man.

'He appears blurred,' explained Ronnie, 'because he's travelling back, through time, from the future. That device he's holding has wrapped him in a relative time cocoon, sending him through non-relative time towards the past.'

'The two kinds of time repel each other,' said the Doctor, stepping back slightly. 'Fascinating.'

'The day I cracked the theory,' said Ronnie, 'and opened up the castle to get on with building such a device, there he was, waiting. Just as you see him now.'

'Just a minute,' said the Doctor, eyes suddenly wide with surprise. 'He's – '

'Me,' chuckled Ronnie. 'Yes.'

'That's you?' I asked. 'Travelling back in time from the future?'

'*Through* **time, Jamie,' corrected the Doctor.**

'Via this present,' enthused Ronnie. 'And look at his wristwatch.'

I squinted hard. 'It's stopped.'

'No,' said Ronnie. 'He is, in fact, moving in extreme slow-motion, but if you film him and play it back, sped up, the hands of the watch are moving in reverse.'

Ronnie turned a computer screen in our direction. An image of the blurred man's watch played over and over, time rolling ever backwards over its face.

‘Can he see us?’ I asked.

‘Judging by the speed of that second hand,’ said the Doctor, ‘I doubt it, Jamie. If anything, we’re just arcs of colour.’

‘The time device is handheld,’ explained Ronnie. ‘It generates pocket warps, which means the traveller needs no vehicle. Anchored to a spatial location, he passes through every moment that transpired there between his future departure and his past arrival. See the departure date on his wristwatch?’

Ronnie pointed at the computer screen. The date read: 08.04.33.

‘Twenty days from now,’ said the Doctor.

‘And the date of arrival…’ said Ronnie, touching the screen, which provided him with a big picture of a tiny counter on the time device. ‘The 12th of March 1972: my birth date. Bit obvious, I suppose. He’s travelling through about a year per second. This means that, as we see him here, he’s only just started his minute-long journey.’

I still wasn’t making head nor tail of this.

Ronnie smiled kindly at me. ‘Imagine you’d been alive on March the 12th 1972, Jamie. Imagine you saw me *arrive***. Suppose a car then knocked me down and killed me. You’d still be able to return the next day and see me here, alive, travelling from the future but** *not yet* **arrived. You could return every day for the next 60 years and still see me standing there, blurred. But return to the castle on March 12th 2033 and you’d catch me preparing for the journey you’d seen me finish when you were sixty years younger.’**

‘Quite brilliant,’ said the Doctor. He took a swig of tea. ‘As long as Jamie doesn’t mention the car accident.’

‘Eh?’ asked Ronnie.

‘How will you know when you’ve reached your temporal destination?’

‘It’ll be programmed into the chronometer,’ said Ronnie. ‘I will arrive at twelve noon.’

‘And I take it you’ve already started building such a device,’ said

the Doctor, looking about him.

Ronnie lifted a dustsheet from a battered workbench and revealed a device just like the one his future self was holding.

'So,' said the Doctor, 'with the means at your disposal, you copied your own work. You'd already got the theory, but seeing the finished device in front of you helped no end. Whenever you wandered up a theoretical cul-de-sac, all you had to do was ask yourself, What would *I* do in this situation; how would *I* build such a device?'

'Quite so,' said Ronnie, perhaps guiltily.

'But it won't work, Professor,' said the Doctor, rather darkly.

'Really, Doctor?' asked Ronnie, gesturing at the figure from the future. 'And what do you see there? A glass half empty or a glass half full?'

'I usually wonder if the glass is there at all,' said the Doctor, thinking hard. He waved his hand dismissively. 'Come along, Jamie. It's time we left the Professor to his work. It's probably nothing.'

We pretended to make for the door.

'Wait,' said Ronnie, taking the bait. 'Please. Explain.'

'Basic physics,' said the Doctor, to me.

'What *about* 'basic physics'?' asked Ronnie.

'Two objects can't occupy the same space simultaneously, Jamie. It's all to do with the electrical fields that normally prevent matter from passing through matter. As far as I'm aware, no one's entirely certain how catastrophic a temporal-physical collision would actually be. It's not the kind of thing even a mad scientist would deliberately attempt. Till now.'

'What?' asked Ronnie.

'Your time device,' said the Doctor to Ronnie, 'is anchored to a single spatial location. And your future self is travelling back through every moment of intervening time to March the 12th 1972.'

Ronnie nodded.

‘Imagine,’ said the Doctor. ‘You’re looking at the chronometer, which reads 12:01pm and counting; in a few chronometer seconds you’ll arrive at 12:00pm...’

‘In one possible world,’ says the Doctor, ‘the March sun shines through the stained glass of a Norfolk castle. Dust dances a mocking waltz along solid shafts of light that illuminate a blurred figure and highlight the chaos and devastation wrought earlier that week at the centre of this blood-soaked hall.’

‘In one possible world,’ says the Doctor, ‘the swirling flux of instants boils about your haloed form, Professor. The chronometer counts the final frantic seconds to noon, March 12th 1972; flashing faster than physics should deem proper. Soon you’ll arrive. Ten. The cocoon is holding. Nine. Never mind the mad meanderings. Eight. Of that annoying. Seven. Little Doctor Smith. Six. The cheek of the man! Five. Oh, to see his face now. Four. And young Jamie’s. Three. It’s so pretty in this cocoon. Two. So very pretty. One. Is that me screaming?’

‘In one possible world,’ says the Doctor, ‘a rainbow-hued figure holding a small electronic device makes a sudden, contradictory appearance at noon, March 12th 1972. Instantaneously, this figure explodes, to be replaced by another – the same figure – and another – the same – and another – the same – and another – the same; each one a pluming ball of blood and bone, continuously replaced by an arriving other – the same – exploding over and over and over for the next fifty-nine years. When the chaos finally ends on April the 8th 2033, the walls, ceiling and floor of a Norfolk castle hall are caked in a scabby brown crust and studded with ivory fragments that glisten with oily jelly, slaughterhouse thick, abattoir red. It smells like fear. Fear and copper.’

‘It was a devil to get clean. All sorts of mess.’

Ronnie gasped his understanding.

‘By the time you reach twelve noon,’ said the Doctor, ‘you’ll be crashed into by your twelve-noon-and-one-nanoseconds self. And so on and so on, because you all occupy the same space and time. The whole lot of you just won’t be able to do that. Temporal pile-up! Very messy.’

‘No,’ said Ronnie, whitely. ‘No.’

‘But it gets worse...’

‘On the 8th of April 2033, Aaron Blinovitch finishes work on a handheld device of paradigm-crunching simplicity. Looking up from his wristwatch, he admires a blurred man: himself but seconds from now. It’s time to be off.

Now we’ll see who knows his basic physics, he thinks, and moves towards the future by stepping towards his future self.

His present self activates the time device and stands in his future self’s place, and in that instant, the two Aaron’s merge, becoming a single rainbow blur that promptly explodes in a time-crash of blood, bone, cloth and metal.’

‘Doctor,’ I whispered.

‘Yes?’

I pointed to where the blurred man had been standing.

There was nothing there now, just computers and cameras peering curiously at nothing. It was as if the man from the future had never been there, never would be.

‘What happened?’ I asked.

‘I have decided not to complete my work,’ said Ronnie.

His eyes were full of tears as he walked from the hall.

He’d made a choice.

We walked back to the TARDIS through melting snow.

‘If you could view time in its entirety,’ the Doctor told me, ‘you’d see a tangled web of immutable facts; some of them catalysed by living beings, all of them catalysed by universal causation; and some of them catalysed by those of us with the persuasive ability to stamp all over everything I’ve just described.

The Time Wrestlers

Lawrence Burton

The house was large with a suggestion of great antiquity, which from the perspective of a time traveller was of course dependent upon where one happened to be stood, or more accurately *when* one happened to be stood. The house might be recent, but was architecturally of a type which had been popular about three-hundred years before Peri was even born. She recognised its kind from places she'd visited in southern California; although the nocturnal heat kept at bay by those thick adobe walls was like nothing she could recall of southern California, which wasn't to say it didn't seem at least a little familiar.

'Please tell me this isn't Andalusia. Not again.'

The Doctor was preoccupied, busying himself in the darkest corner of the room, below a crusty oil painting of what appeared to be a humanoid tiger. Hopefully it was indicative of the home owner being a fan of L. Frank Baum's *Wizard of Oz* books rather than directly representative of whoever or whatever lived here. Crouched and bumbling to himself, the Time Lord had taken on the appearance of animated laundry in his ludicrous patchwork coat, specifically the animated laundry accumulated at the close of a heavy pantomime season.

'It's not Andalusia.'

He wasn't giving much away, and his attention was mostly with the artron detector in his hand – a lightweight metal and plastic rod of black and silver, an ostentatiously futuristic vacuum cleaner calibrated to detect a thing so important that he wasn't even going to tell her what it was; but the street directly outside the house was surfaced with something other than asphalt – close inspection revealing it to be marzipan – and there was a bronze statue of Buckwheat from the *Our Gang* movies down on the corner. The statue was about fifteen feet tall, and while it did nothing to directly contradict the laws of physics, its very existence seemed difficult to justify. There was a mystery here.

Peri lowered the polished oak cover of an ornate bureau, revealing green baize and glass jars repurposed to the storage of an uneven collection of fountain pens and pencils. Handwritten letters and documents were stuffed into the slots at the back. The letters were all in Spanish, as were the labels which had not been fully scrubbed from the jars. She picked one up for closer inspection. It had once contained jalapeño slices, *hecho en Mexico***.**

'Great.'

She rolled her eyes to the ceiling, which was admittedly quite lovely what with all of its plaster mouldings and pseudo-classical paintwork. This had doubtless once been the residence of some dignitary. Perhaps it still was.

'What is it?' The Doctor wore a face suggesting he'd already calculated how little he was going to like the answer.

'We're in Mexico.'

'Again?' He glared at no-one in particular, apparently scandalised.

Peri waved the jar by way of illustration. 'I guess you're going to tell me you didn't know.'

'I didn't.' His frown adjusted so as to accommodate this latest inconvenience.

'You might simply have said *no* **and told them to do their own dirty work.' Peri shrugged. It wasn't like she took pleasure in stating the obvious.**

The Doctor grunted and resumed his efforts, making low sweeps in the corner of the room with the artron detector. 'They can be very persuasive.'

'Yeah, I get that.' Peri considered the TARDIS as it sat nestled within the alcove of a window reaching from floor to ceiling, half hidden behind the velvet drapery of its landing site. She turned her gaze to the doorway opening onto what was obviously a stairwell. This being one of those old colonial-era houses, the kitchen would be in the basement and was most likely fairly well stocked, if the opulence of this one room was any indication.

'I'm just going to get a sandwich.'

'You do that.'

She took another look at the TARDIS, felt duly sad, then headed for the stairs.

The TARDIS had changed before, but nothing quite like this, and the transformation doubtless accounted for at least some of the Doctor's mood. The landing had been unusual, in being felt a good quarter of an hour before they were able to open the doors. Specifically it had seemed as though they were in the hold of an aircraft traversing turbulent skies; and in a way, they had been. Opening the doors, they had stepped down onto a little blue wing, and then to carpet. The TARDIS remained a police box above the level of its base, but below it had become a tiny aeroplane with small rounded wings, propeller, tail, and wheels with fat yellow tyres. It was caught halfway between the familiar blue box and something you might be allowed to ride at a fairground, providing you were under six years of age. The Doctor's current theory was that they had arrived in some variant reality wherein their transport would most logically and necessarily be understood as a form of aeroplane, which in turn somehow influenced the shape it had taken. This theory was in some sense related to whatever he was currently engaged in detecting. Presumably he'd tell her all about it when he was good and ready, once he was equipped with facts and theories of sufficient grandeur to allow him to fully pontificate upon his own brilliance.

The stairs were smoothly carved stone with a wrought-iron handrail following the curve of the wall, all lit by electric lamps mounted high up. Peri's descent brought her to a window overlooking a large garden, but it was night so she couldn't see very much. Orange lighting beyond the trees picked out a marzipan street, and the silence belonged to the dead of an unfamiliar night.

The stairs came to a hall of large flagstones, much like those in Doña Arana's hacienda in Andalusia, but of course it was simply that the architectural style had been brought across the waves by the Spanish when they came to Mexico. It occurred to Peri that her sense of place was currently founded more or less entirely on the label of a jar of pickled peppers, fortified by the strong feeling of having become stuck in a loop. Perhaps this was simply what happened when running

errands for Time Lords, an inevitable consequence of having anything to do with those people; if they *were* people.

The hall terminated with a large door of black wood, with three similar doors running along its length towards a second window overlooking the garden. The nearest door was open and the shadows and reflections within suggested a kitchen. A strip light flickered as Peri threw a switch at the side of the door to reveal that this was indeed a kitchen. Searching in cupboards and a large, somewhat antiquated fridge as quietly as possible, she quickly assembled the necessary supplies for a sandwich; and as she sliced the large, rough loaf of bread it occurred to her that she'd taken the emptiness of the house entirely for granted. The Doctor had immediately busied himself as though there were no-one home, and so she had taken this to be the case without thinking.

She paused in her actions.

She gazed redundantly towards the ceiling, listening for any sound which could betray some disturbed Señor rising from both slumber and chambers to repel intruders. She could hear nothing and realised that were there any likelihood of such a scenario, it would probably have already happened.

She sliced. She spread. She set a couple of peanut butter sandwiches onto a plate and hoped that the owner of the house wouldn't mind too much. Then the thoughts of repeating patterns – herself and the Doctor running in circles – returned as she ascended the stairs, pulsing to the beat of her own footfalls echoing down the stone spiral: Mexico, colonial architecture, Atonal and Xolotl, Chessene and Shockeye, and the Doctor meeting that older version of himself - actually a younger version of himself, but he'd looked older for reasons she had no plans trying to understand. Maybe meeting another version of oneself was an inevitable consequence of saying *sure, I'd be glad to do that for you* to a Time Lord. Maybe that's why he was in such a poor mood *this* time. Maybe he was simply trying to get whatever it was done, to eke out what he could find before he ran into himself yet again.

'Doctor, you want a PBJ sandwich?' she called as she entered the room.

He gave no response. He stood to one side of the drawing room,

transfixed.

She followed his gaze and saw that he was looking at himself, the same one this time. Of course, time travel being what it is, if you're going to run into earlier or later versions of yourself all over the place, there's no reason why it always has to be a different one, she supposed.

She glanced back at the first of them - *her* Doctor, realising his mistake before he had.

'It's a mirror, big guy.'

He blinked, horror softening to surprise, then straightened himself up. 'Good grief.'

Peri set the plate of sandwiches upon the bureau and they both walked over to the mirror. It was a full length job, gilt frame and all of the trimmings.

'Did you find anything?' she asked.

He shook his head, contradicting the gesture with his words for no obvious reason. 'Traces of artron energy, or something very much like artron energy. You see that patch over there?' He pointed to a rectangular area of carpet a little lighter than its surrounds. 'That's where it would normally sit.'

'Where what would normally be sat?'

'The time machine, or whatever it is.'

'The Time Lords have you chasing another unofficial time traveller? Is that what we're doing?'

'Do try to keep up, Peri. It would make life so much easier.'

She sighed and fetched the plate. 'You really need to eat something. If you took a moment to listen to yourself, you would know I'm right.'

He snatched a sandwich and bit off a corner without any conspicuous display of grace. 'Most palatable,' he observed, words muffled through a mouthful of sandwich. 'My compliments to the chef, but without further ado we must away.' He waved his hands, herding Peri towards the TARDIS.

She clambered up onto the tiny wing and paused, casting a dubious glance at the little propellor around the side. 'Doctor, do you think—'

'I have no idea but I'm sure we'll find out. In you go.'

She disappeared within and he bounded up into the time machine, slapping his palms to be rid of bread crumbs. Inside the TARDIS he found Peri warily regarding the console. It had changed, retaining the basic hexagonal mushroom but now otherwise resembling a child's activity centre.

'Oh really!' He scowled at what was apparently a minor inconvenience, then slapped a hand down onto a bulb of bright yellow rubber which compressed and caused a plastic clown's face to roll its eyes as a bell sounded. The traditional chorus of dematerialisation failed to make itself known, although they could hear the sputtering of a tiny engine from somewhere beneath the floor. The Doctor directed a long-suffering face towards the ceiling.

'I suppose that will have to do.'

Peri had opened up the door leading to the interior. She wrinkled her nose, effecting a sceptical expression. 'This couldn't be one of those other rooms you er—'

'Secondary and tertiary console rooms. Regrettably no, but I'm sure we'll get to the bottom of all this quite soon. I have every confidence.'

'It's just that the last time we were in Mexico...'

'I'm well aware, thank you, Peri.' He span a bright red plastic wheel and scowled as a ping-pong ball sailed up the length of a transparent tube, then floated back down again. The engine sound changed tone, the pitch falling to invoke a tiny aircraft coming in to land.

'That was quick.' Peri had unconsciously braced herself against the frame of the inner door, recalling the turbulence of the previous landing. 'Wouldn't you say that was quick?'

'We haven't quite travelled by the usual means,' he muttered, now examining some display set into the casing of his artron detector. He glanced across at the console, comparing something or other. 'This is more of a step sideways, you might say.'

The doors opened and they made their way out onto a surface of some description.

Peri looked down, and whilst she could see just fine, what she saw made no sense. She had no frame of reference. She looked back to the TARDIS and saw that the tiny wings were gone, as had the ludicrous propeller. Unfortunately, although back to its old shape, the box was now bright pink and covered in sparkly stickers depicting cartoon ponies. 'Doctor—'

'One problem at a time, Peri.' He drew himself up to full combative height and marched off into the middle distance of a realm without distance in conventional terms.

'But what is this place?'

'It isn't a place at all.' He stomped onwards. 'We're outside of the space-time continuum.'

'We're what?'

Whether an answer came or not, Peri's attention moved swiftly elsewhere as she saw the wrestler.

He was a large muscular man in a flamboyant wrestling outfit with a mask and great silver boots - a luchador, she recalled from seeing Mexican wrestlers on television when she was a kid. He wore a cape, and his mouth was bordered with a trim beard, flecked with silver and grey.

Beside themselves, the luchador was the only person present in this non-space; and he was slotting pesos into the coin operated mechanism of a fifties jukebox, a slick looking machine lit from within, all fins and Bakelite, resembling a cross between an apartment block and a low rider.

The wrestler turned. '¡Hijole!'

'You may well say that, my friend,' the Doctor boomed, still advancing, 'but I can assure you that-*Oouf!*' The air abandoned his lungs as the costumed figure manhandled him to the ground, or at least to whatever lay beneath them. Before he could react, the Doctor's left leg was wrenched backwards forcing his foot into the side of his own

face.

'Your people may be the masters of all time and space,' said the luchador in a voice rich with martial confidence, 'but when it comes to fighting as would a man, you seem lacking in certain departments, if you don't mind my saying so.'

The muffled response of a pained *not at all* sounded from beneath the huge wrestler's bottom, which had now made a seat of the Doctor's face. All the while, the Doctor's arm flapped uselessly as his other hand finger-walked across ground which wasn't ground like a cautious crab, then climbing the wrestler's side to pounce unexpectedly onto a shoulder, then just a pinch...

'Ooow!' The combatant howled as he bowled across the non-space, clutching at his neck. He rolled to stand, then immediately crouched, ready for another leap.

'Just one moment, if you'd be so kind,' the Doctor said testily, getting to his own feet with a pained expression. 'Just what do you mean by *my* people?'

As though from nowhere, Peri came to a sudden halt from her run up, a cricket bat fetched from the TARDIS in her hands, raised and ready to strike. She considered the two men and realised that hostilities were momentarily suspended.

'I know of your people, my friend,' the luchador explained, 'and although I do not understand what you are doing, be assured that I will put a stop to it.' He flexed himself, ready to spring, causing the muscles of his arms to bulge – muscles covered in tattoos of astrological symbols.

With an elegance which seemed alien to both his bulk and his colourful attire, the Doctor stepped aside just as his opponent flew at him. The man crashed to the ground, or at least to the non-surface beneath their collective feet, executing a perfect roll back to a standing position as he did so.

'You took the words right out of my mouth.' The Doctor smiled, apparently unconcerned, then gestured towards the juke box – or whatever it was. 'I presume that object to be the source of the trouble.'

'That's a time machine?' Peri boggled. 'That's the reason for, for the,' - she wasn't quite sure what to call the phenomena and so made a vague gesture towards the bright pink TARDIS with all of its stickers.

'Yes. Goofing round with the timestream is a delicate business and one best left to the experts.' It sounded very much as though the Doctor was hoping to convince himself of this, that he wasn't simply doing the Time Lord's dirty work for them. It was the same observation he'd made regarding his earlier self back in Spain.

'You think so?' The wrestler wore a brightly coloured mask with the number 105 sewn upon the brow, but the widening of his eyes in an expression of something like outrage was evident even through the sloped lenticular holes through which he considered his foe. 'Have you seen what your experts have done to my city?'

'*My* **experts?'**

'The Paseo de la Reforma, that once mighty concourse, is now layered not with asphalt as would befit a road, but in the fashion of a celebration cake, thanks to your experts!'

The Doctor backed away, as the wrestler rounded upon him with unmistakable menace. 'Now listen here, my dear er—'

'Señor 105, in case it isn't obvious.' He jabbed a finger at the numeral emblazoned upon his mask. 'Have you seen the Angel of Independence lately?' It was a rhetorical question, supplemented with further detail before anyone could reply. 'Last week the statue was a great beauty, the pride of the city. This week she is el Chavo, the children's character – a ridiculous man who lives in a garbage pail!'

The Doctor and Peri exchanged hurried glances amounting to *I don't know either***.**

'It is all thanks to your fiction bomb!' Señor 105 had begun to rant, overtaken by his own passion. He had become like a bull, snorting and pawing at the ground, all sense of reason set aside as he stood face to face with one of the star-born monsters who had done such a great wrong to his city.

'Desist!' the Doctor barked, bringing his hands together in a single clap of the kind traditionally employed to silence rooms of energetic

children. 'Did you say *fiction bomb*?'

'I know a little of the ways of your people. There is a woman...'

'Yes, I'm sure there is.' The Doctor grimaced inwardly, then turned quickly to Peri. 'A fiction device would certainly account for what's been happening to the TARDIS, along with the changes this gentleman describes.'

'So you're saying that's a better explanation than his er...' - she gestured towards the jukebox - 'whatever that is?'

'That is the Zodiac Machine,' Señor 105 interjected, a little stung. 'Am I to understand that you do not ally yourself with those other Time Lords? Do you take no responsibility for the use of fiction-based weaponry?'

'I don't and no, although I'm not actually clear on the Time Lords of which you speak. I'm generally more of a free agent, you might say.'

'Apart from right now,' Peri added helpfully.

'Yes, thank you, Peri. I'm quite aware of the potential conflict of interests here.'

She shrugged. 'You're welcome.'

The Doctor was silent for a moment, his brow heavy with thought, then, clapping his hands together, he flashed the wrestler a pragmatic smile. 'Perhaps you had better tell me what you know.'

Señor 105 briefly took upon the gravity of some great statesman, heavy with foreboding, before turning away as though pretending to examine the display of his Zodiac Machine. 'I would say we are in a very great amount of trouble, my friend, for there is so little that I am able to tell you. As I'm sure a gentleman of your heritage will understand, certain regions of my country's history present difficulties for those of us who move in the fourth dimension.'

'Yes,' the Doctor confirmed without much certainty. He noticed Peri's scowl, then cleared his throat. 'I mean to say, it does?'

'Why yes. You are a Time Lord, I would say. Have you not encountered the difficulties of which I speak?'

'I'm not sure, because you are still to speak of them.'

'There is some confusion around the year 1500, give or take a decade on either side, an area of mystery. You have no experience of this?'

'I haven't, or at least I haven't yet.' He appeared a little embarrassed. 'But please continue.'

'That is all I know, aside from that your people are uncommonly interested in that era.'

'Yes, they would be, I suppose. Although I wish someone had said something to me.'

Peri came forward. 'Doctor, not even my government is *that* dumb. They wouldn't send you to investigate something they're doing themselves.'

'Perhaps not knowingly, although of course where my people are concerned, the one hand is often blissfully ignorant of the innumerable pies in which it has its own fingers, never mind what will happen at the end of the other arm later that afternoon.'

Silence held as the three contemplated these words, each in their own individual way. As they did so, an awareness came to them. They were in a wrestling ring, ropes and brightly painted canvas infecting the space all around; and there was a crowd and bright lights, and it seemed natural as though they had been here within this venue all along.

'It's getting worse.' The Doctor was gripped with sudden concern.

The wrestler himself appeared more bewildered than anyone. 'This is some dream?'

'Sadly no. The fictional wave-front of the core detonation has passed beyond conventional space-time. I imagine the effect we're seeing is something to do with your good self. We're all being drawn into *your* narrative.'

'Doctor, look!' Peri was transfixed by a trio of figures on the other side of the ring.

Each wore elaborate wrestling masks embellished with an ornate marquetry following the line of the eyes, with on the forehead the familiar infinity symbol of the Great Houses. Aside from the traditional wrestling boots and tights, they also wore large hemispherical collars, and their motions seemed born of confusion. They had no idea what was happening either.

Señor 105 went forward, ready for the match. 'So your people also partake in the noble art.'

'It appears they do now.' The Doctor was trying not to laugh as he regarded the three of them. 'Didn't see that one coming, did you?' he taunted.

With a roar, the largest of the Time Wrestlers took a run and launched himself through the air, his great paw-like hands reaching out. The Doctor moved swiftly aside and the luchador rolled onto the canvas with a thump. Before he could get to his feet, Señor 105 was upon him, sat upon the fellow's side and grinding his face into the mat with one knee. 'Your people are clumsy and out of practice,' he grunted at the Doctor. 'Doubtless this is why they wage their wars with strange weapons, so as to keep their hands from getting dirty.'

'I'm not even sure they're my people, strictly speaking.' The Doctor cast a cautious eye at the other two Time Wrestlers, both readying themselves to join the fight. 'Something is very wrong here. We Time Lords don't do this sort of thing. At least we don't do this sort of thing *yet***.'**

'They are from the future, do you mean to tell me?' Señor 105 grunted as a second opponent gripped him about the chest from behind and hauled him up, freeing the first.

'Owww!' the Doctor howled as the third punched him hard on the shoulder, he span and caught brief sight of a clenched fist drawn back, the knuckles glistening with some brass accoutrement, four needles along its length now spattered with blood. Then he fell as the first sprang at him from below, wrestling him to the canvas.

Peri cried out in panic, swiping with the cricket bat but somehow failing to make contact.

'I thought as much,' barked the one who had drawn blood, now

examining the device worn upon his fist. 'There's a potential trace of the Faction in his biodata. He's one of them.'

'I have no idea what you're talking about,' the Doctor bellowed from beneath the other two Time Wrestlers, 'and all things considered I'm not sure I *should* know.'

The third now joined his colleagues, bodily launching himself sideways to land on the Time Lord's midriff with a thump. 'We know that ludicrous cult of yours is up to something back there, so there's no point denying it,' - he grunted as the Doctor's knee momentarily freed itself from the scrum and caught him in the gut - 'and we will have that technology regardless. You do understand that there's a War—'

Time ceased, creating a peculiar frozen tableau of one multicoloured Time Lord struggling beneath three statues, the Time Wrestlers stilled and fading to immateriality as the sound of a twenty-five peso piece clunked into an antiquated mechanism.

Scratches popped on a well-played record as an ominous trio of notes were plucked out on the higher strings of a guitar, then a bass, then an organ...

I'm living somewhere in a new dimension,

I'm leaving everyone so far behind...

Señor 105 stood over his Zodiac Machine as spirals of abstract colour seemed to radiate from somewhere behind it, swirling, melting the wrestling ring, the entire imaginary environment as though it had been merely cream poured into coffee.

Don't waste any time, girl,

Step inside my mind...

The Doctor was on his feet. His face was grave as he looked quickly around but found no sign of the three who had bettered him only a moment earlier. Peri meanwhile ran towards the heart of the maelstrom, the source of the music, seeking safety in the eye of the storm.

I'm five years ahead of my time...

'I see you are troubled, but have no fear.' An unsettling calm had overtaken Señor 105. 'With the distraction you have provided we are now able to take a closer look at the terrible occurrence which has wrought such ludicrous harm upon my city.'

The Doctor gazed at the patterns forming in the ether all around. 'To think of the trouble we endured in mastering the art of time travel, when we could simply have used an old Rolling Stones record.'

'They are called the Third Bardo,' Señor 105 corrected him, amused.

Peri's voice had fallen to a whisper as she peered into the swirling light, entirely unable to see anything of the TARDIS. 'I'm not even going to ask.'

Look into my mind, look ahead, don't look behind,

I'm five years ahead of my time...

'Perhaps not five years,' Señor 105 chuckled to himself, 'but it should be enough.'

The place was a great ceremonial square, stepped pyramids of stone on all sides; except it was not a place but a moment trapped beneath a frozen sky of a colour seen only in dreams, a moment without energy, no motion in any direction.

'This is where they will detonate the fiction bomb, I would say.' The luchador fiddled with a pocket on his suit, pulled out a chocolate bar and began to eat. Then he paused, seeming momentarily awkward. 'I am sorry. I have only the one. I did not anticipate company.'

The Doctor was oblivious. He regarded the square, the pyramids, the frozen heavens. He began to talk, seemingly for his own benefit. 'Just like breaking into a bank vault, I suppose – piling the dynamite up against the wall. But what was in the vault and how did they hope to make use of it?'

'That is something I thought *you* might better be able to answer, these being your people.'

Peri tutted to herself irritably. 'Maybe someone would like to tell me what we're doing here.'

'It seems we are near some kind of causal knot of considerable proportions, something my people will one day seek to access for militarist reasons, apparently. I therefore presume its value might be something to do with their being unable to secure the aforementioned access.' The Doctor appeared suddenly wistful. 'They want it precisely because it is denied to them.'

'A causal knot. Right. You mean a paradox or something of that kind?'

'I couldn't possibly comment.'

'You don't think we—'

'Like I say, I couldn't possibly—'

'Here they come!' Señor 105 stuffed the wrapper in the pocket from which he had produced the chocolate bar. 'I figured the delay would be about two minutes.'

Three familiar figures had formed at a little distance, the Time Wrestlers emerging from the fog of this frozen moment, still holding the positions in which they had been snatched from the timestream, now stacked like bizarre tailor's dummies upon the memory of a temporarily subdued Doctor; and just as the three figures became solid and animate, they were joined by three more somehow emerging from a fourth. A line of bright light slipped down the form of a woman who opened like a wardrobe, disgorging the three in their High Council robes; and these were the same three, here with their fiction bomb, arriving just in time to encounter the Time Wrestlers they would soon become.

'What I don't understand,' said Peri, picking a stray piece of tomato from her plate and reintroducing it to the taco, 'is why that doesn't happen when *you* meet other versions of yourself?'

The Doctor made a noise presaging speech, but was defeated by his own chewing. He raised a finger amounting to just one moment as he continued to chew.

'You like!' Señor 105 grinned jovially from behind his mask and slapped the Time Lord on the shoulder with a mighty hand. 'Doña Maria serves the best tacos in Coyoacan.'

'They are pretty good,' Peri admitted. She gazed across the street to a wheeled stall selling corn, a street of asphalt, rather than any other less likely substance. It was late afternoon and the statue now cast a long shadow of some revolutionary guy she had never heard of, which was as it should be. Yet somehow the restoration of normality was not so comforting as might be hoped. She still had no idea what had really happened, beyond that it may or may not have been something to do with that other time when they had been here. It felt like finding oneself reduced to an extra in somebody else's story. Maybe it was best not to think about it too hard.

'Chaotic limiter,' spluttered the Doctor through the last stubborn mouthful of his taco, but no-one understood what he'd said, and maybe it didn't matter that much.

The Channel Hoppers

Daniel Blythe

Verity knew she'd seen it, and yet it was impossible.

There *in* the television. Hiding there behind the reader's chair, as her little brother watched the CBeebies bedtime story. She knew that it wasn't part of the programme – that it should not be there.

It seemed to be fluid, made of shadow, and looked like an evil monk. A dark robe, a cowled hood, glowing red eyes buried deep in the darkness. It was *skulking* – that was the only word for it. A skulking monk. Like it knew it could be seen, and was almost embarrassed.

But Verity had to squint to see it properly, and she couldn't quite get a focus. In the darkened room, curtains drawn against the pale autumn light, she could have imagined it.

'Is the telly working properly?' she asked her mum, Lisa, at tea-time the next day.

Lisa was clipping back her tangled black hair with one hand while ladling tagliatelle with the other. She seemed to freeze, ladle in hand, as if Verity had said something that scared her. She looked at Verity very seriously, as she did sometimes.

'I think so,' she said. 'Why?'

'Oh, nothing really.' Verity didn't know why she tried to make it sound so light, inconsequential. 'It's just that sometimes you get weird… shadows on the pictures. Sort of… flickers.'

Lisa slowly continued ladling the pasta into her daughter's bowl. 'Well,' she said, 'you could always watch it on the computer instead.'

'I suppose so,' said Verity. She decided not to worry about it.

The next afternoon, she saw it again.

This time, there was no mistake, and it gave her quite a start. It slipped across the screen during *Newsround*, right through the back of

the studio.

It moved like dark water, or tar – schlooping across the floor in its monk's habit, scurrying behind the desk and darting into the back recesses of the studio. On screen, the newsreader, Jenny, didn't even seem to notice – she just carried on reading the news in her breezy, friendly way. It was something about the European Union, which Verity wasn't really all that interested in. It was one of those things which got her dad very energised at the dinner-table, usually with quite a lot of swearing about people in the Government.

Seconds later, the thing was gone – as if it had just merged into the walls.

Verity was puzzled. It took her just a few seconds to do what she should have thought of doing yesterday – grab the iPad and find yesterday's CBeebies bedtime story on iPlayer. She got it to the right place and watched carefully.

There was nothing. No strange shadows, no weird black figure skulking behind the reader's chair.

This was very odd.

The doorbell went. Verity's brother, Tom, looked up from bashing plastic bricks together and pointed out into the street. 'Goor!' he said.

Verity ran into the hall. From upstairs in the bathroom came the sound of splashing. Her mother, who had got back from work ten minutes ago, was in the shower, and hadn't heard a thing. Sighing, Verity stomped up the hallway and opened the door.

A man was there – facing away into the street at first, but when the door opened he swung to face her with a friendly grin.

'Hello!' he said.

He was – how old? – younger than her dad. Quite tall, with a sort of pleasant, open face and floppy fair hair. He lifted his hat in an old-fashioned way, like she'd seen her grandad do.

'I'm terribly sorry to bother you,' said the man, a little uncertainly, 'but I wonder if I could trouble you to make a pot of tea?'

‘A pot of *tea*?’ she repeated.

Verity looked him up and down, wrinkling her nose. You didn’t see many men in coats like that, she thought, not to mention the cricket jumper and the striped pink-and-white trousers. She politely ignored the fact that he seemed to have some kind of vegetable shoved in his buttonhole. It was probably there for a good reason – to remind him to eat his Five a Day, or something.

‘Yes, please,’ said the man, smiling. ‘Lapsang Souchong, if you have it. Or, actually, any good strong tea will do. With milk, and definitely no sugar.’

Verity was a bit taken aback by the request. She peered past the man. Outside, a large blue box seemed to have appeared on the pavement of Colbrook Avenue. That hadn’t been there before.

‘Is that your Police Box?’ she asked with a scowl, folding her arms.

Her Grandad Paul was in the police, and he had shown her a book about them. They were phone boxes which police officers used to call each other with, before they had radios.

The young man swung round to look at it, his hair swishing, then back to Verity again. ‘Ahhh. Yes… I mean, very probably. Look, it won’t be there for long.’ He looked down at the polished, upright black-stone cat which adorned their doorstep, and patted its head. ‘That’s very handsome,’ he said.

‘My mum says it’s good luck. She’s had it since she was little.’

‘I see… What year is this?’

Verity didn’t think that was an odd question. She was often forgetting what year it was herself. She glanced at the calendar in the hall. ‘Twenty-sixteen,’ she said. ‘Why?’

‘No reason.’ The young man looked her up and down, puzzled. ‘Are you human?’ he asked, suddenly.

She laughed. ‘Usually.’

‘How old are you?’

‘Eleven. Why?’

The man beamed. ‘What’s your name?’

‘Verity Hopkins.’

‘You’re very well-informed, Verity Hopkins. Congratulations.’

At that moment, a younger man with red hair emerged from behind the Police Box. Verity guessed he was about twenty, but oddly he was wearing a school blazer and tie. He had an expression of weary resignation, and he threw a ball-sized tangle of wires and electrodes to the fair-haired man, who caught it expertly.

‘It’s no good, Doctor,’ said the ginger boy petulantly, arms folded. ‘The whole thing’s burnt out. Did you *really* think you could carry on with a warp amplitude stabiliser in that state?’

The man called Doctor looked a little hurt, glancing at the boy. ‘These things happen, Turlough. Wear and tear, you know.’

Turlough, **thought Verity. Weird name.**

‘Well, you’re the expert, Doctor,’ the boy said. He suddenly seemed to notice Verity. ‘Oh, hello! I assume he’s got you making the tea?’

‘Look,’ she said. ‘I don’t want to be rude. But I’m not used to randoms turning up at the house asking for tea. Or Police Boxes appearing out of nowhere.’

The boy Turlough sighed, rolled his eyes and looked at the Doctor. ‘You *did* say you thought they’d be hospitable.’

‘Did I?’

A girl with cropped, reddish-brown hair came out of the Police Box, shutting the door behind her. ‘Are you gonna be much longer?’ she asked, with an edge to her voice. Verity watched enough *Neighbours* to recognise the girl’s accent as Australian. She liked her clothes – a battered leather biker jacket over a lurid, multi-coloured mini-dress, black tights and boots. The girl smiled at Verity. ‘Hi, I’m Tegan. Don’t worry if this seems a bit odd – it’ll all make sense eventually. Is your mum or dad in?’

‘Dad’s at work. And Mum’s having a very long shower.’ Verity weighed things up for a second. ‘Are you… investigators?’

‘We try not to be, on the whole,’ said Tegan. She jerked her head at the Doctor. ‘I just want a quiet life, but *he* keeps getting us into trouble.’

The Doctor turned on her. ‘Tegan, I *did* explain that casual references to Earth fauna would be likely to get you into *serious* trouble on Vanatox IV.’ His voice went rather high-pitched as he admonished her, waggling his rolled-up hat at her like a baton. ‘And what did you do? Only go and shout *Rabbits!* right in front of the Emperor’s throne. Do you have *any* idea how long we could actually have spent in that dungeon if we hadn’t escaped when we did?’

Tegan made a dismissive noise. ‘If you still had the sonic screwdriver, we’d have been out in seconds.’

‘Yes,’ said the Doctor, gritting his teeth. ‘Terileptils. *Thank* you for reminding me.’

‘Okay, okay!’ Verity held her hands up. ‘Calm it, guys.’

She had no idea who these people were, nor why they wanted tea so badly. But what she did know was that they looked like the kind of people who might just understand why weird things were happening on the telly. Weird things which made her feel all shivery, and had kept her awake last night.

‘You’re frightened,’ said Tegan. ‘Why?’

Verity folded her arms, annoyed that Tegan had noticed. ‘No reason.’

‘Come on, now,’ the Doctor said, raising his eyebrows and folding his hands behind his back. ‘What seems to be the problem, mmm?’

Verity tried to think how to phrase it. ‘There’s… something in my telly,’ she said awkwardly.

‘Ahh.’ The Doctor nodded, with a wisdom that made him look much older. ‘There often is!’ he said brightly.

‘You get it all day, now,’ Tegan added. ‘I used to watch the Test

Card. It was sooo boring. That girl and her clown.'

'No!' said Verity crossly. 'I mean something that shouldn't be there! Like someone living in it.'

The Doctor leaned down and stared at her thoughtfully for a second. 'I see… May we come in?'

Tom was still happily piling plastic bricks up on the floor, and barely gave the newcomers a second glance. The Doctor squatted in front of the television, feeling all round it and sizing it up, while Tegan and Turlough looked at each other in embarrassment.

The Doctor straightened up, and began flicking through channels with the remote control. 'How long have you had this television set?' he asked.

Verity shrugged. She couldn't really remember. 'Ages. It's quite old. I think it's been here since my mum was little. She was born in this house.'

'Who is it, darling?' called Lisa's voice from the landing.

Verity swung round the door and called up the stairs. She had to think quickly. 'It's the Jehovah's Witnesses, Mum. I'm making them a cup of tea.'

'Oh.' There was a surprised pause. 'All right.'

Tegan and Turlough exchanged a puzzled look, and Verity just grinned at them.

The Doctor had flicked on to a boring channel, one of those her dad liked. She could see some grim-looking men steering large trucks on what looked like sheets of ice. They seemed quite happy about it, with no sign of anything untoward. He flicked again, and ended up on another boring one – that woman in a bright green satin blouse who was always talking about various items of jewellery. Nothing wrong there, either, thought Verity. The Doctor flicked again, and now her eyes lit up as she recognised the brightly-coloured, tubby figures scampering around what looked like a golf course.

'Well, it seems all right now,' said the Doctor.

‘Probably just interference,’ said Tegan. ‘Or the vertical hold going. That used to happen on Aunt Vanessa’s telly all the time.’

Verity had no idea what she was talking about, but now she did remember something else. She darted over to the sideboard and grabbed the small, silver disc, like a little make-up mirror – but with no glass in it – which always sat in the fruit-bowl. Her mum had always said it was important to keep it, and she had never explained what it was – just that it was something very important to do with the television, and they’d need it if the TV ever went on the blink.

‘Is this any good?’ Verity said, passing the disc to the Doctor.

The Doctor lifted the disc up, glanced at it and raised his eyebrows. ‘Ahhh. Very possibly,’

‘What is it?’

‘Well…’ began the Doctor.

‘Wait!’ exclaimed Turlough, darting forward. ‘What’s *that*?’

Verity went cold. She had seen it, just a fraction of a second before the boy pointed to it. A shadow, flickering as if it was not really there, appearing behind the Teletubbies’ hill for a second – just an impression of a shoulder, maybe, or a head – and then it was gone.

‘It was *there*!’ she said. ‘Just behind Po, there!’

The Doctor absently slipped the silver disc into his pocket and leaned down, scanning the screen intently. ‘Come on, come on…’

‘Behind the *what*?’ said Tegan to Verity.

‘Po! The red Teletubby.’ She reached out to the screen, thrilling to the crackle and fizz of it. ‘I used to love these when I was little.’

Some impulse made Verity actually touch the screen. She reached out, put her hand on the TV screen in the Teletubby’s chest, just like she used to when she was two years old.

That was odd. She was kind of *stuck*, now. She felt a tugging sensation, a fizzing around her hand. And then the television went all squishy and gloopy, like mud. It seemed to be tugging her towards it.

Pulling her right *inside it*.

Verity screamed.

‘Doctor…’ said Turlough in alarm. ‘Is that… supposed to happen?’

The Doctor leapt forward and grabbed Verity’s other arm. ‘Resist it, Verity!’ he exclaimed, breathless as he started to lose his footing on the carpet. ‘Tegan, Turlough! Whatever you do – *don’t turn this television off!*’

Verity screamed again. She felt as if her stomach was being pulled inside out. Something was tugging her closer and closer, into the heart of the TV, even though the Doctor was holding tightly on to her other arm. There was a popping sound, and a swirling vortex of blue light, and then she lost all sense of space, spinning and swirling – like on the slide at Center Parcs, only faster, more furious, with rushing blue light whizzing past her.

‘Hold on!’ the Doctor shouted. She could feel him gripping her hand. ‘Hold on tight!’

Schlooooooooooooooooooooooooooooop-POP!

And then it was over, and she flopped out of thin air on to sweet-smelling grass.

The thud of the impact knocked the breath from her body. Something soft was nuzzling against her face. She gasped, and the rabbit withdrew, hopping over the green hills in the distance.

Seconds later, the Doctor appeared – materialising in thin air and dropping on to the grass on all fours, looking only a little dishevelled.

‘Are you all right?’ he asked, helping her up.

‘I… I think so,’ she said, dazed. ‘Where are we?’

‘I’m about to find out,’ replied the Doctor airily, hands in pockets and pivoting a full circle. ‘Don’t wander off. I don’t know how stable these entry points are.’

‘All right,’ said Verity, whose eyes had widened as she spotted a familiar fluffy, wiggly yellow aerial bobbing over the nearby ridge.

‘Hey, we’ve got company,’ she said with a grin.

‘Ah!’ said the Doctor, brightening. ‘Local inhabitants. Friendly, I hope!’ He extended a hand towards the wobbling Teletubby, who just swung back and forth in puzzlement and concern.

‘Laa-Laa,’ said Verity crossly, ‘do you know why we’re here?’

The Doctor looked down at her in astonishment. ‘You *know* these creatures?’

‘I should think so,’ said Verity. ‘I used to watch them every day.’

‘I don’t know if you can help,’ said the Doctor to Laa-Laa. ‘We’re looking for a dimensional anomaly. Some kind of quasi-temporal interference between the signal and the source?’

Laa-Laa just giggled.

‘She won’t know what you mean,’ said Verity to the Doctor, adopting a severe tone. She tried to sound like Miss Bradshaw did when she told off Kyle Stephens. ‘You’ve got to ask it in a way she’ll understand.’

The Doctor looked at Verity, then at Laa-Laa, then back to Verity again. ‘Do you really think so?’ he asked, sounding abashed.

‘Yes! Laa-Laa…’ She paused. How to phrase the question? They were really just big, multi-coloured, space-age toddlers. So how would her three-year-old self have asked it?

She knew.

‘Laa-Laa,’ said Verity, slowly and clearly, ‘where did the Nasty Bad Man go?’

Laa-Laa thought for a moment, then very slowly pointed down to the silvery TV screen on her stomach.

The Doctor looked skywards. ‘Of course. I should have realised.’

‘What?’ asked Verity, looking up at him.

‘Waaaaa?’ repeated Laa-Laa interestedly.

‘A Hopper,’ he said.

Verity shook her head in bemusement. ‘What?’

The Doctor spoke very quickly. ‘That’s what they’re called. Colloquially speaking, of course. An entity which can, ah, navigate between dimensions of reality, as easily as you or I could hop on a bus. Only I think it’s got stuck. It’s cornered. And we have to track it down!’ The Doctor reached out. ‘Give me your hand, Verity.’

She did so, confused. ‘What… You mean…?’

‘I’m afraid so,’ said the Doctor. He lifted his hat to Laa-Laa. ‘If you wouldn’t mind, madam? I’d be so grateful.’

Laa-Laa leaned back, spread her arms as if in a welcoming hug, and thrust her stomach out. Static appeared on the screen, and the Doctor and Verity ran towards it.

The screen grew, coming up to meet them….

And they jumped again.

Through the fizzing snowstorm of static, which stung like hail.

Straight into the path of a speeding car.

The Doctor shoved Verity out of the way just in time, and they rolled to the edge of the race-track. The car, something big and shiny and blue, screeched into a spin, with an odour of hot rubber and metal. It slammed to a halt and a tall, thickset man with curly hair got out, his face livid with rage.

‘What the *hell* are you doing? You utter *imbeciles*!’

He threw his white crash-helmet aside and stomped over to the Doctor and Verity, standing over them, hands on hips. ‘You could have got yourselves killed! You complete *dolts*!’

The Doctor helped Verity to her feet. ‘Yes, well… I think we’re all right. Nothing, er… broken. Thank you for your… concern, Mr, er...’

A smaller man with scruffy, dark hair ran over to the tall man’s side. ‘Steady on, Jeremy,’ he said in quite a soft, quiet voice. ‘These people didn’t know they weren’t supposed to be here. Are you all

right?' he asked.

Quickly, Verity spoke to the smaller man, sensing he was less angry and more inclined to help. 'We're looking for a – what is it, Doctor?'

The Doctor held his hands out in front of him, as if cupping an imaginary ball. 'A Hopper. It's, well, a shape, a shadow. Anything which looks as if it doesn't belong here.' He raised his eyebrows as the two men looked at one another in puzzlement. 'Please?' he added. 'It really is very urgent.'

'Not seen anything, mate,' said the man called Jeremy, who was still very cross. Verity supposed it was because they had interrupted his car games. 'You sound like a pair of loonies. Have they let you out for the day?'

'Is there a television round here?' asked Verity. It seemed like the right question to ask, and this angry man was scaring her a bit.

The Doctor beamed down at her. 'Excellent thinking, Verity!' He looked back at the two men. 'Quickly, please,' he said, somewhat breathless by now. 'We need to replicate the, ah, infiltration path of the Hopper. Before the tachyon field becomes corrupted.' He looked from one man to the other. 'Please!'

'I suppose you could use my phone,' said the smaller man, bemused. He reached into his pocket and offered his smartphone.

'Yes, yes!' The Doctor grabbed the phone and, within seconds, had a media player up and running. 'Ready?' he said to Verity.

This, she thought, was the weirdest thing ever. But she kind of knew what to expect now. She nodded. 'Ready!' she said.

'Let's go!'

The Doctor threw the phone up into the air – and they jumped.

The screen, black and enveloping, came up to meet them.

It swallowed them up, with velvety darkness all around. The air seemed to smell of toffee for a second, and then, with a swish and a swirl of reality, like velvet drapes, they were somewhere else.

Total darkness.

Verity looked around in alarm for the Doctor. 'Where are you? I can't see you?'

'Here!' he called, running, emerging as if in slow-motion from the blackness behind her. His body seemed to leave after-images in the darkness, like traces of himself. He pointed, and his arm cut a cream-coloured arc through the blackness. 'Look, there's the interface.'

A white square was rushing towards them, shapes forming in its depths.

'We mustn't miss it,' said the Doctor. 'I think we're getting closer. Hold on!'

Like light at the end of a tunnel, the white square got bigger and bigger, a rushing wind almost blowing the Doctor and Verity off their feet.

Then it hit them like a gale.

Reality whooshed into being. Lights, bright and hot, took shape around them.

On the hard floor was a tangle of cables. The rest of this reality coalesced: a curved white desk, with two teams of three people facing each other, and a pretty, round-faced young woman with long blonde hair sitting in a seat between them.

The woman looked up in alarm from her cue-cards. 'Er, excuse *me*. I know I've had a few, but where did you lot come from?' She looked from one team of contestants to the other. 'Can you see them, or have they spiked my Scotch?' The contestants all laughed.

'Yes, yes, I'm *terribly* sorry.' The Doctor raised his hands as if in surrender, running across the studio floor. Verity followed him, smiling awkwardly at the contestants. 'So sorry,' said the Doctor again. 'I know this is an imposition.'

'We're trying to do a quiz here!' said the woman, but she sounded more amused than annoyed. 'Did you want to join in? The Young Farmers need a bit of help. They're six points behind the Rock Musicians.'

The team on her right looked smug, while the team on her left chuckled good-naturedly.

'Have you seen anything unusual here today?' the Doctor asked her. 'It's very important.'

The woman leaned back, blew her cheeks out thoughtfully. 'The producer did offer to buy a round earlier,' she said. 'That was a bit weird.'

The contestants all chortled politely.

'Where's it gone?' The Doctor was darting around impatiently, looking into monitors, camera lenses. 'Don't say we've lost it.'

Verity was looking around, too, taking in the brightly-lit studio and the cameras. 'I *watch* this,' she said. 'You've got a… wall thingy. With, you know, those clues on it.'

'A wall?' said the Doctor, rounding on Verity. 'Where?'

'Ask Victoria,' said Verity, nodding to the blonde host. 'Her.'

Victoria sighed. 'Oh, all right. This is very irregular, you know.' She clicked her fingers and a grid of sixteen blue squares sprang into being on Verity's right. She gasped. The words on the squares, though, were flickery and illegible, as if they were only half there.

Victoria put a hand to her ear. 'Geoff?' she said. 'I think the wall's knackered. Can you give it a tweak?'

The Doctor and Verity slowly approached the Wall. 'I don't think it will be Geoff's fault, somehow,' said the Doctor slowly, and he prodded the wall before stepping back quickly. The blueness rippled like water.

'I always thought this was a camera trick,' said Verity in wonder. 'You know, like in that other programme where the teams sit on top of each other. Only they don't…'

'Ah, well…' The Doctor was peering at the Water Wall through his half-frame glasses, crouching down to look at the bottom row. 'The Hopper will have caused a certain amount of interface corruption, as it tore through the fabric of space-time. Some of the usual laws of physics may not apply any longer.' He gave Verity a quick, boyish grin.

‘Fascinating, isn’t it?’

The host, Victoria, had come over to stand behind them with her arms folded. ‘Got anywhere?’

‘Well…’ The Doctor straightened up, looking upset. ‘No. Not really.’

Victoria sighed, clicked her fingers. The board flipped, and another appeared in its place, the words equally indistinct. ‘Try the Lion Wall instead.’

‘There!’ shouted Verity. She had seen it almost the instant Victoria clicked her fingers – a shadow passing between the first and second columns of the board. The outline of a man, but not quite… its face blurry, egg-shaped…

‘Come on!’ The Doctor grabbed Verity and, as Victoria shouted ‘Good luck!’ they leapt into the pixels of the board. It smashed like glass, and reformed behind them.

Verity looked over her shoulder. The board was tumbling, falling into a vortex, and now, so were they… She could see the Doctor falling ahead of her, holding on to his hat, his coat-tails flapping.

Seconds later they hit the ground again, and this time Verity tried to roll. Something crunched under her – gravel? She straightened up as quickly as she could, shading her eyes against the sunlight.

The Doctor was beside her, she realised, in the same instant that she noticed they were in the shadow of a large stately home. On the lawn a few metres away from them, a young man in a frock-coat and a high-collared shirt was having an animated discussion with a woman in a long blue dress.

They were arguing quite angrily – but the next second, he said something which made her laugh, and they fell into a deep, passionate embrace.

‘Bleurgh,’ said Verity. ‘Get a *room*.’

The Doctor wasn’t listening. He had his hat on, brim pulled low against the sun, and he pointed out on to the croquet lawn. ‘There’s our culprit,’ he said softly. ‘Remember, whatever you do, don’t let it

touch you.'

Verity could not see it at first. Then she blinked, and it was as if reality swirled, took shape around the robed, egg-headed creature with the coal-red eyes.

It was the blackest black, like a creature made of tar or pitch, or pure night. Her eyes hurt to look at it. The thing made no attempt to run as she and the Doctor strode towards it.

'Led us quite a merry dance, haven't you?' said the Doctor, fumbling in his pocket for something.

'I saw you!' Verity said accusingly, as they got to within just a metre or two of the dark creature. Although it was a deep, gothic black, she noticed with a shiver that it was not casting any shadow in the bright sunlight. 'I saw you in my telly!'

'You should *not* be here,' admonished the Doctor, wagging his finger at the creature.

It inclined its egg-head, and the two red coals of its eyes flared orange. 'And what do you propose to do about that?' it hissed and gurgled. There was bitterness and anger in its voice, so much that Verity took a step backwards.

'I assume you can't run any more. Out of dimensional energy at last, hmm?' That sort of made sense, thought Verity. 'How long have you been trapped?' asked the Doctor.

The creature hissed. 'In your Earth terms, sixteen years.'

The Doctor have a low whistle. 'That's a *long* time to be in the wilderness.' He held up the object he had been fumbling for. The item from their fruit-bowl, the thing which looked like a small, silver make-up mirror – but which Verity had already guessed wasn't one. The Doctor smiled, tapped it. 'A DCU. A very simple Dimensional Containment Unit. Primitive, but effective. I can pop you in here, drop you off somewhere safe. Somewhere you won't give children nightmares.'

The Hopper gurgled again, moving threateningly towards Verity. She just sighed, and put her head on one side.

‘No, mate,’ she said. ‘Sorry, but I’ve been on ghost trains scarier than you. Why don’t you pop yourself inside the Doc’s little gizmo? Sounds like a good deal to me.’

The Hopper looked from Verity to the Doctor and back again, swinging its great black egg-shaped head from side to side. ‘One fixed place,’ it said, ‘and one fixed time? It is… against our nature.’

‘Yes, I know.’ The Doctor smiled. ‘Believe me, I’ve been there. It does have its benefits.’

The Hopper lunged, and screamed. It was a shrill, high-pitched shriek like a thousand banshees combined with the sound of feedback, and it drilled right into Verity’s brain. Clapping her hands over her ears, she fell to her knees as the Hopper flew for her, its dark and ragged arms outstretched.

At the last second she remembered the Doctor’s instructions not to let it touch her, and rolled aside on the lawn.

Her hand came down on a slipper.

Two slippers.

She gasped. She looked up, and saw dark legs, a pink towelling bathrobe. Hair wrapped in a fluffy pink towel.

‘I can’t leave you alone for a second, can I?’ said her mother. ‘Doctor! Here!’

The Doctor executed one of his best gentle lobs, and the little silver DCU sailed through the air, spinning, catching the sunlight. It seemed to leave traces in the air behind it, just as the Doctor had done in the interface –

And a second later, Verity’s mother caught the DCU and flipped it open, swivelling it round to face the screeching Hopper.

A cone of light emerged from the DCU, like a giant iridescent funnel, smacking into the Hopper and attaching itself to the creature’s body.

The Hopper’s form swirled and warped as its screeching reached a pitch. It began to be dragged in, like black water swirling down a

plughole. Lisa held the DCU firmly, even though it was blazing with light and seemed to be getting very hot.

The Hopper gave one last scream, twisted and writhed, looking like an angry tangle of black rags or a swirl of smoke. Then it was sucked inside the DCU.

Lisa slammed the lid shut, and breathed a sigh of relief.

There was silence on the sunlit lawn, apart from the distant cawing of rooks. Verity thought she could hear the soft sound of violin music, but she had to be imagining that. Slowly, Verity straightened up and looked very seriously at her mother.

'Did you know what we were doing?' she asked.

Lisa smiled. 'Of course. It was me that called the Doctor. You didn't think he just turned up on the off-chance for a cuppa, did you?'

Verity folded her arms. 'What? How do you *know* the Doctor?

Lisa smiled. 'Like you said to him, sweetheart. We have had that telly a *pretty* long time.' She tossed the DCU to the Doctor, who fielded it with a grin. 'Nice togs, Doctor,' she said. 'I think I prefer that coat to the velvet one.'

Verity scowled. 'Oh, great,' she said. 'And I thought you were just having a shower.'

'How are Tegan and Turlough?' asked the Doctor breezily.

'Fine,' said Lisa. 'I've made them some tea and left them looking after Tom.'

Verity was not happy. She wasn't really bothered that her mother had come in and stolen all the glory, but she did think she had spotted a bit of a flaw in the Doctor's plan.

'Doctor?' she said.

'Yes, Verity?'

'How do we get back?' she asked.

'Ahhh. I'm very glad you asked that.'

Lisa folded her arms, and nodded towards the stately home. 'We go and find a telly?' she said hopefully.

The Doctor adjusted his hat and dusted himself down. 'Exactly so!' he said, and with a happy grin, he began to lead the way across the lawn towards the house. He stopped suddenly, pivoted round on one plimsolled foot and looked awkwardly from Verity to Lisa and back again. 'Although,' he said, 'we may have to try a few until we find one with suitably wobbly interfaces. When we do, we all need to hold hands – and *not* let go!'

Verity looked up at Lisa, smiled, clasped her hand. All things considered, she was quite glad to see her mother.

'Oh, one more thing,' said the Doctor. 'Lisa… if you don't mind my asking, how old are you right now?'

'Twenty-seven,' said Lisa, frowning. 'Why?' Then her face cleared, as she seemed to remember something. 'Ohhhh! I know why!'

'Good,' said the Doctor. He wagged a finger. 'But *don't* tell me! Time plays funny tricks, sometimes.'

And they all made their way into the house, in search of a television set.

With a sound like shearing metal and the trumpeting of a thousand angry elephants – or, perhaps, a wheezing, groaning noise – the Police Box materialised on the pavement of Colbrook Avenue. The light on top of the box pulsed for a few seconds after the wheezing stopped.

Inside the Police Box – which was not a Police Box, but in fact a Time and Space vessel known as the TARDIS – was an impossibly huge, dimly-lit room full of books and scientific apparatus, with a many-sided console at its centre. At the controls stood that mysterious traveller in Time and Space known only as the Doctor. Now in his twelfth incarnation (although, in truth, the Doctor himself did not really bother counting like that any more, because there had been a bit of confusion along the way and he didn't really like to talk about it these days), he was tall and lean, with an imperious, high-cheekboned face and elegantly swept-back grey hair. Authoritative blue-grey eyes were framed by dark, imposing eyebrows, while his mouth was set in what could have been determination, or grim amusement. He was

dressed elegantly in a high-buttoned white shirt and a purple velvet frock coat.

'I'm just… popping out for two seconds, Clara,' the Doctor called out. Then he tutted, chiding himself. 'No. No Clara. Don't be so silly, Doctor.'

He flipped the TARDIS-blue sonic screwdriver from hand to hand, smiling ruefully, as he stepped out into the sunlight.

The Doctor looked up and down the street. 'Right place,' he said. 'Should be about the right year.' He scurried up the street – arms at his sides a little awkwardly, as if not sure what to do with them – until he got to Number 26. He opened the small wooden gate. He patted the black stone cat on the head as he rang the doorbell.

Nobody answered at first, so he leaned on the doorbell, then jabbed at it over and over. He could hear it ringing inside, going *bing-bong, bing-bong* **incessantly.**

A voice came from within. 'Lisa! Will you answer the damn door? I'm in the bath!'

There was a pattering of feet, and then the door opened a crack. A girl of about eleven stood there, with tangled black hair tousling around her shoulders.

The Doctor leant down, hands on his thighs, and smiled, holding up his sonic screwdriver. 'Lisa Hopkins?' he said.

The girl nodded.

'Dr Blinovitch, from Dr Blinovitch's TV Repairs. I've come to fix your telly.'

The girl's eyes widened. 'About time,' she said.

The Doctor nodded his head from side to side, as if weighing this up. 'Well… yes,' he agreed. 'It often is, in a way.' He held up the small, silver flip-top disc of the Dimensional Containment Unit. 'And I'd also like you to look after this, if you would. To keep it safe for about… How old are you now?'

'Eleven,' said Lisa.

The Doctor nodded. ‘Keep it somewhere safe for about… sixteen years, will you? I’ll be back for it.’

Lisa nodded, took the little silver disc and put it in her pocket.

‘Will you come in and fix the telly, then?’ she asked. ‘It’s nearly time for *Children’s Ward*, and I don’t want to miss it.’

The Doctor grinned. ‘Of course,’ he said. ‘Lead the way.’

Lisa smiled, opened the door and let him in.

The Bogeyman

Andrew Hickey

February 13th

Dear Diary,
Today I saw a spaceship!
It was when I was walking home from school with mummy. I pointed it out to her, but she said it was just a street light behind a tree.
Mummy says spaceships aren't real, but I saw on TV where people went to the moon in a spaceship.
That was a long time ago, though. Maybe they don't have spaceships any more. That would be rubbish.
We had dinner and watched the telly. Dinner was salad, because Mummy says I need to watch my weight. I hate salad. But it was good where the robots exploded.
I wonder if there are real robots.

February 14th

Dear Diary,
Sorry if I'm not spelling so good today, but I'm very tired. When I went to bed last night I heard a banging sound from the wardrobe. I was very scared, but I knew Mummy would shout at me if I asked her to get rid of the monsters. She says there are no monsters. I was very brave though, I didn't have an accident, but I couldn't sleep for a long time. I was all yawning in school.
We learned about gypsies in school. They do dancing and live in caravans and go around wherever they want. I told my mummy I want to be a gypsy when I grow up, on the way home from school, and she smacked me and said there was no way I was going to be a b word gyppo.
I didn't realise it was naughty to want to be a gypsy. I'm glad mummy told me before I did it.
I'm very sleepy. I hope the monsters aren't too noisy tonight.

February 15th

Dear Diary
The monsters were even noisier last night! Mummy shouted at me to keep the noise down, but it wasn't me – it was the monsters! I love my mummy, but she does sometimes shout at me for things I didn't do, and that's not

very nice.
When we got home there was a man outside the house, looking through my bedroom window. He had a thing in his hand that went beep, and he was wearing all colours like Joseph. We did Joseph in school.
This man wasn't Joseph, though. My mummy shouted at him lots, and she must have already known him, because she knew his name it was Peter File. She said lots of naughty words to him. I told her she shouldn't say those words, and she told me to shut up.
The man tried to talk to my mummy, but mummy just shouted louder and louder at him, and threatened to call the police, so he went away. I told my mummy that if she wanted to call the police there was a special telephone box for police that I'd seen while she was shouting, but she said not to be silly, and when I looked again it wasn't there.
It must have been a magical telephone box.
When we got in, mummy hugged me very tight and cried. I don't know why. He didn't seem like a bad man, and he can't have been a stranger because mummy knew his name.
I hope the monsters aren't noisy tonight.

February 16th

Dear Diary

The monsters were noisy again, and I didn't get very much sleep at all. Miss Brown, the supply teacher, told me off for falling asleep in class. I started crying, so she took me into the cloakroom to calm down, and asked what was wrong. I told her how I hadn't been able to sleep because of the monsters, and asked her not to tell my mummy off me.
She said she wouldn't tell. I like Miss Brown. She is American.
America is a long way away – even further than Blackpool, my mummy says.
Mummy made me hold her hand on the way home today. She hadn't done that since I left infants. I got upset at her because I'm not a baby.
I saw Miss Brown talking to the colourful man in the street on the way home. Mummy didn't see, and I didn't say anything, because I wasn't talking to mummy. I'm not a baby. I'm nearly ten!

February 17th

Dear Diary
The monsters have started whispering to me while I'm in my bed and saying they're going to get me. I was so scared I had an accident, and mummy smacked me, and then the monsters laughed at me again.
I told Miss Brown at school today, and she looked VERY CROSS, and I

asked her to please not be cross with me, and she said she wasn't, but that she would like a word with my mummy. I hope she's not going to tell my mummy I've been going to sleep in class.
Mummy made me hold her hand AGAIN all the way home. I hope I get to sleep tonight. I'm very, very tired.
We had sausage and chips tonight, and watched a thing about travelling in time. Mummy says nobody can travel in time. It's a shame. If I could travel in time I'd go forward to when I'm a grown-up, and bring the grown-up me back to beat up the monsters.

February 18th

Dear Diary
Mummy thinks I'm lazy, because I wanted to stay in bed all morning today. I wasn't lazy, though, I was just tired. I couldn't go to sleep because of all the monsters whispering to me about how they were going to eat me up. Mummy still doesn't believe me about the monsters. She says we have enough to worry about with the Muslims without being scared of monsters. My friend Ayeesha says she's a Muslim, but she's not scary at all. Mummy must be thinking of different ones. Sometimes words can mean two things.
I saw the blue box again today when mummy and me were at the shops.

February 19th

Dear Diary
The monsters in the wardrobe are gone!
Mummy sent me to bed early last night. She said I was naughty yawning all the time, and if I wanted to stay in bed, that's where I'd go, so she sent me to bed at teatime.
I heard a knocking at the wardrobe door, and I heard the monsters saying they were going to eat me right then. I screamed and screamed and screamed, but mummy didn't hear me because she was watching the telly. The wardrobe door started opening, but then I heard another sound. There was a sound like an elephant, and the blue telephone box appeared in my room – and the wardrobe door slammed shut! I think I heard a rude word from in the wardrobe, but I might be imagining things. Mummy says I do that a lot.
The door of the telephone box opened, and the colourful Joseph man stepped out. His name isn't Joseph though, and it isn't Peter like mummy thought either – I called him that, and he said Peter was a silly name and he'd never be called Peter, and that he was called the Doctor.
(I definitely heard a swear word come from my wardrobe when he said

that).
He asked me what was up, and I told him about the monsters in the wardrobe.
He said 'Oh, those aren't monsters. They're just Bogeymen from the planet Bogimon.'
But he had shiny eyes like grown ups do when they're making things up to tease kids. Anyway, I know Bogeymen don't come from other planets, because I've read Fungus The Bogeyman all the way through all by myself.
He told me the Bogeymen live off fear, and they scare little kids until the kids die, then drink their a word I don't remember, it sounded like drainline. He said they do it to kids because grown-ups are harder to scare. Actually, he said some grown-ups, and looked towards the room where my mum was. I wonder why.
He said that the best way to get rid of Bogeymen is just to show them you're not scared, and to tell them their names. So he told me that when he said 'now' I should shout 'Bogeyman!' as loud as I could, over and over again.
He got a pointy, shiny thing out of one of his pockets, and said 'Now!' and flung open the wardrobe door. There were a couple of gruesome green wobbly things with noses in there, and there was all swirls behind them and I couldn't see my clothes. I shouted 'BOGEYMAN BOGEYMAN BOGEYMAN' as loud as I could, and they looked VERY scared.
The Doctor was pointing his pointy thing, too, and they looked a little bit scared of that, too, but mostly it was me.
The Bogeymen moved back, all scared, saying sorry, into the swirls, and the swirls disappeared and I could see my clothes again.
I asked the Doctor how come there was all swirls, and he said it was a dime menstrual tunnel that made my wardrobe dime menstrually trans dented. He also said that if the bogeymen came back I'd know what to do.

Tomorrow, I might ask my mummy if I can walk home from school all by myself. And then I'll see about dealing with the ones under the bed.

Time War Cutaway

Andrew Lawston

Romana threw the latest sheaf of reports across her empty office. 'Stalemate. The TARDISes are impervious, but they've got no firepower. A logical impasse, how tiresomely familiar.'

The Presidential office still carried a lead colour scheme, complete with bas-relief cogs. Borusa had always declined to explain their significance and they'd been there a few hundred years, which meant they'd effectively been there forever and were part of Gallifrey's heritage.

Romana sank into her chair with a long sigh and stared glumly at the tactical screen that dominated one cog-studded wall. It looked like an explosion in a maypole factory, red and yellow traces shooting in every direction. Some of the traces were moving temporally, some of them pointed into universes that would never exist. They still *looked* red or yellow, but Romana could tell the difference.

She opened a drawer in the huge mahogany desk, and pulled out a slab of chocolate the size of her head. Time to self-medicate.

The Doctor bounded into the room and pressed his nose against the thickest of the yellow traces. 'I see we're winning then!'

'Our forces are red, Doctor.'

The Doctor squinted closer at the display, then checked his fob watch. 'Are you sure? Oh well, it's still early.'

Unable to repress a smile, Romana offered her friend some chocolate. He shook his head, taking a paper cup from his pocket.

'No, thanks. I'm sorted for stimulants this morning. And apparently it's Fair Trade, although what's fair about charging money for this sludge is beyond me.' He took a careful sip and pulled a disgusted face.

Romana rolled her eyes. 'You ran the transduction barrier *and* a Dalek blockade just to get coffee?'

Eyes twinkling with mischief, the Doctor perched on the corner of Romana's desk. 'That would be silly. I sent the Prydon Marines.' He noticed the colour rising in Romana's cheeks, and continued quickly. 'You did tell me I needed to delegate more.'

Not trusting herself to speak, Romana just pointed at the tactical screen venomously. The Doctor smiled. 'Yes, I thought you'd say something like that. So *I* took a quick trip to the Daleks' plasma mines on Braling IV, two hours in the future. About now, I suppose...'

With a smug blip, a yellow trace vanished from the tactical screen and two more veered off towards the distant past. Romana laughed and put the chocolate back in her drawer. She put her elbows on the desk and rested her chin on her cradled fingers. For the first time that morning, her face was alive.

'Braling IV? Was it terribly dangerous?'

The Doctor leaned close. 'I had to fight off nine Ogrons on a walkway a hundred metres over a lake of molten iron. And *then* I reprogrammed a Special Weapons Dalek with the kama sutra. It crawled straight out of its casing and wandered off to make little Daleks while I used its blaster to overload the refinery reactor.'

'Very good.'

'I've another trip lined up this evening. Come with me.'

Romana could smell blaster discharge in the Doctor's hair. She could see the TARDIS key poking from his waistcoat pocket. A very long moment passed.

She sat back and found some papers to shuffle. 'I think it would be more appropriate if you took your regiment.'

The Doctor shrugged, chestnut curls bouncing around his shoulders in a decidedly unmilitary style. 'I do hope this war won't turn you into a bureaucrat, Lady President.' He breezed out of the office, leaving his foul coffee behind him.

Romana shook her head a little sadly, pulled out a fountain pen and began composing a fresh list of strategies. She nominated the Doctor for another medal, because she knew how much that always annoyed

him.

Then she paused, suddenly struck by the strangest feeling she was being watched. As she glanced around instinctively, she failed to notice the drying ink *pulse* under her nib, writhing for the briefest second on the loop of an 'l' like a snake sneezing.

Coordinator Engin tottered over to his console, doing his best to ignore the pain in his knee. Other Time Lords tended to regenerate into young, vigorous bodies, in their prime. He always seemed to end up renewed in a frame only marginally less decrepit than the one before. Was it psychological? He didn't have much time for such pseudo-sciences, but he adored his position as Gallifrey's most illustrious archivist, and perhaps he felt that such an important role demanded a certain gravitas that a younger body would not command. He sighed, and picked up the Data Extract on his desk.

It was the Doctor's, again. Quite why people were incessantly accessing the records of Gallifrey's prodigal son, he had no idea. No one had shown much interest during the man's centuries of exile, it seemed almost perverse to be so curious about his history now he was back on Gallifrey and positively eager to answer questions about his disreputable and murky past.

Of course, the Doctor was standing right behind him. 'Another Dalek agent?' he asked coolly, then took a large bite from a round green fruit. *Apple*, Engin remembered happily before replying.

'It does seem likely, Doctor. Apparently it was withdrawn and read by Runcible, the poor chap that lout the Master murdered the first time you were back here.'

The Doctor nodded, but didn't reply at once, his mouth full of apple. Eventually he swallowed, and grinned. 'We'll find out when they make their move. What's the allergy this time?'

Engin patted the extract with a wink. 'The ground root of the coriander plant. I know you're partial to a good curry.'

The Doctor took a final bite from his apple and tossed the fleshy core over his shoulder carelessly. 'Ah, Daleks. Never ones to let a bad tactic die. Let's hope they never think of a new one.' And with that, he strolled out.

Engin clutched at his console, opening the hidden drawer with the Doctor's *real* Data Extract. 'Let's hope they never find out who you really are,' he whispered, his face grey.

The Doctor strolled down the corridor towards his rooms, where he insisted on keeping the TARDIS. The walls were clearly sampled from Peladon's catacombs, but he couldn't quite place the carpet. He smiled softly. War had come, Gallifrey was finally taking notice of the wider universe, only to find it wasn't half as bad as they'd thought. Vindication, of a sort? Maybe.

His thoughts were interrupted by a small man in stained overalls cannoning into him from a side corridor. 'Thete, mate!' the newcomer squealed, 'Been looking all over for you! I've got a pukka lamb bhuna simmering in my gaffe – fancy a bite?'

The Doctor pushed him away, betrayal and shock etched deep in his face. 'Drax?' he said incredulously, his hand moving to his frock coat pocket.

Drax threw back his head and laughed. 'Nah, I'm only messing – I ran into Elgin earlier. The look on your face!'

The Doctor grabbed Drax by the shoulders and pushed him up against the wall, hard. 'Have you any idea -' he began, but stopped when he saw Drax staring over his shoulder and shaking.

A ghost drifted down the corridor towards them in Time Lord robes, semi-transparent and carrying a plate full of food. Its face was pleading, eyes wide and plaintive.

'Doctorrrr,' it called. 'I'm sorrrry. Have a tandoori prawnnn...'

Drax sighed as the Doctor released him. 'Three centuries on, the flashbacks keep coming. Don't do sherbet, Thete.'

The ghost started throwing prawns at the Doctor. One struck him on the cheek, leaving a smear of red food colouring and lemon juice. He caught the prawn on the rebound and popped it in his mouth. 'This is definitely a new development,' he said, chewing slowly. 'I feel we should be doing something.'

Romana appeared from the side corridor, ducking to avoid a chunk

of flying seafood. 'Isn't *anyone* taking this war seriously?'

His prawns exhausted and looking increasingly uneasy, the ghost flung the lettuce-garnished plate at the Doctor, but missed. Drax stepped forward.

'Runcible, mate? That's really you, isn't it? What happened to you?' He noticed the gory stains on the ghost's robes. 'That is... what *else* happened to you?'

Runcible's shoulders slumped dejectedly. 'In the dark,' he groaned. 'Voices in the dark. Promised me a new body... at last. They're everywhere in the dark. And moving to the light. They're in the Keep!'

Runcible's voice fell silent, but his mouth kept moving, his eyes ever more imploring. The three Time Lords stepped back instinctively as his form convulsed, beams of light bursting through a spiderweb of fine cracks in his face and hands. The light grew brighter, until only the Doctor stared into the inferno of Runcible the Fatuous, his face grim.

The ghost collapsed into a cascade of fiery fat sparks, none of which so much as singed the mysterious carpet as they tumbled towards the Doctor's feet.

Romana was already calling for Weird Forensics through a wrist communicator she'd fished from her jacket pocket. She looked down with a scowl as the Doctor tugged her sleeve. He was crouching in the sparks.

They were dying, fading. And as each speck of light winked out, it revealed a tiny scrap of paper, printed with tiny black letters. 'Ember' or 'pixel' were on most of them, with 'spark' and 'particle' closing the gap as the lights died.

Romana prodded one of the scraps with the toe of her boot. 'A syntactic projection,' she said drily, 'I'd have thought that technology was a bit prosaic for the Daleks. So, they still have access to the Matrix.'

The Doctor picked up a bunch of the scraps and stood, paper fluttering between his fingers like snowflakes. He frowned. 'This is worse. I'm leaving for a while, Romana. Cover for me.' He strode away

without a backward glance.

Drax giggled to break the tense silence that followed the Doctor's departure. Romana turned to him questioningly.

'Prosaic, syntactic... good one.'

She ignored him. 'The first excuse and he's off,' she said. 'This is Gallifrey's war. We can't rely on one man, even if he is the Doctor. It's high time I explored other options.'

Unabashed, Drax gave his President a sidelong glance. 'If only you had a morally flexible engineer who could reprogram the N-forms, eh?'

'Could you do that?'

'I could rustle you up a fleet of bowships to transport 'em in and all – no problem.'

Romana inclined her head. 'Interesting, keep me updated. I need to explore *other* other options.'

Try as she might, Romana couldn't do without the Doctor's input in the days that followed. He knew the Daleks too well, and all the Matrix extrapolations highlighted how integral he was to the War, how inextricably his destiny was linked with that of Gallifrey. So she hijacked a transmat beam and dispatched a CIA agent to challenge the Doctor's fourth self to avert the Daleks' creation.

His partial success bought Gallifrey some valuable time, slowing the Daleks' development as a galactic power, but sparking a greater interest in time travel from the dawn of their civilisation – time corridors and taranium cores vanished from history, and Dalek timeships scouted the Vortex aggressively, bristling with chronotic disruptors.

In this way, Davros supplanted his old rival Yarvelling as the undisputed creator of the Daleks. He wasn't aware of that fact of course, and the War continued to progress much as it always had, including the bits that hadn't.

In the TARDIS, the Doctor lowered himself into his favourite armchair, the lights dimming as the Ship realised its pilot was in a thoughtful mood. A cup of Darjeeling sat cooling at the Time Lord's

feet as he scratched his chin and stared into the central column, some distance away.

Eventually, he sighed. 'One way to be sure,' he said, reaching down to retrieve a book from the pile of hardbacks that now lay where the cup of tea had been.

For a long time, the only sound in the TARDIS was the gentle crinkling of turning pages.

'The President of the Time Lords abroad in the Daleks' primary munitions asteroid? Is Gallifrey so sparsely populated you must run your own fool's errands?' Davros leaned over Romana, who was trying to look defiant in spite of being strapped to a Dalek mind probe. Drax was strapped to a second probe opposite her, and Romana had been alternating her venomous glowers between him, Davros, and the useless N-form in the middle of the room.

She gritted her teeth against the building mental pressure. 'Gallifrey only needs a handful to put paid to your nasty little bunch of monsters.'

Davros sneered, and wheeled over to Drax without replying. Romana groaned in spite of herself, the weaselly little engineer was already drenched in sweat and shaking with terror. He whimpered as he saw the crazed old scientist reaching to activate the probe.

'No need for that, mate,' he babbled suddenly, halting Davros's wizened hand and prompting a heartfelt sigh of frustration from Romana. 'I mean, we're both engineers by trade, I don't need no pressure to show off me work. You can take the Time Lord superweapon, no skin off my nose. Just don't, you know, get hasty.'

Davros was almost lost for words. After a moment, he half-turned to indicate the boulder-sized machine. 'This, then, is your ultimate weapon?'

Drax gulped under Romana's withering look. 'N-form, yeah. Extra-dimensional killing machine. Don't believe me, ask the Great Vampires. These things damn near wiped 'em out for us. We came to prime it with Dalek DNA for a new target, but it's on the blink.'

'Drax, you idiot! If the N-form's primed with Gallifreyan DNA, the

entire cohort will turn on the Capitol, even from storage!'

The third eye in Davros's forehead glowed fiercer with naked greed. The tiny voice in his head that warned him against ranting was quickly silenced; even if their machine wasn't what they claimed, had he not captured Gallifrey's President? Excited, he rolled over to the N-form and let rip.

'A... trojan horse, I believe our mutual friend would call such a device? Interesting... to know that I hold a power so destructive it could lay waste to Gallifrey without even *waking* your Council of corrupt degenerates! I have the key to bringing your pathetic impotent Empire to its knees, and you are powerless to prevent it!'

Drax rolled his eyes. 'OK, don't get cocky, mate. You are nicking it.'

'Evidently,' Davros grated. 'This is not a Dalek tactic. Daleks have no need of 'N-forms' and other such nonsense. They are strong! They are supreme! And they will conquer Time even as Gallifrey is choked by its own arsenal!'

The old scientist was thoroughly worked up, flecks of spittle spraying all over the chamber at his every word. Romana was drawing breath to yell at Drax when she realised the man had his fingers crossed, despite his obvious terror.

A single droplet of saliva landed on a small panel on the N-form's base. The panel receded into the machine with a quiet but ominous *click*. Davros froze in horror. 'No.'

Drax grinned cheerfully as the N-form began shaking and belching steam. 'Yeah,' he said. 'Silly us trying to prime it with Dalek material, forgetting the N-form acquires targets by detecting *mutations* compared to its sample file.'

'And you're the *only* surviving source of old Kaled DNA, Davros,' Romana said. 'If it's any consolation, that means you're now the only safe being on this asteroid, apart from us.'

As she finished speaking, the N-form opened out in a blossom of spikes, blades, cables and tentacles. A single tendril seemed to sniff the air before the thing trundled from the chamber, extruding new limbs as it went.

Davros chased after it as fast as his wheelchair would allow as the air suddenly grew thick with Dalek screams. Romana shook her head as Drax sprung open his restraints with a well-placed, confident tap.

'You're an idiot,' she pointed out as soon as she was free, rubbing her wrists ruefully.

'Nah, just a bit forgetful. After all, the Vampire War was the other end of history. That's why them N-forms are so unsubtle.'

There was an explosion nearby and a white-hot Dalek's dome frisbeed in through the door. Romana ducked as it scythed over her head and embedded itself in the wall. 'Time we were leaving,' she said shortly.

The Doctor read. He'd always loved reading, always been drawn to books, those doorways to worlds that were so much bigger on the inside than even his TARDIS could ever hope to be. It was a passion that didn't sit particularly well with saving the Universe, however, so his stints were usually limited to those rare nights when his companions slept and Time had no need of her Champion.

He'd been reading for four solid days now, and although he was dimly aware that it wasn't the best time, he was relishing the opportunity to catch up a bit.

Except... it had been a while, but he was fairly sure Holmes's nemesis hadn't always been a dandy with a velvet fetish. He also couldn't remember Gimli going mad after sneaking to the heart of Fangorn Forest and discovering a production line of saplings being awoken as a new Entish Army. Ralph Nickleby perishing in a fire caused by dangerous experiments with mirrors and static electricity? That rang no bells whatsoever.

The Doctor scribbled a note on the pad he'd balanced on the arm of the chair, and turned yet another page. He stopped reading, and stared at the first lines. He reached for the pad, then hesitated and stared some more. 'I think we have a result,' he murmured.

Marking the page with his sonic screwdriver, the Doctor stood up and stretched.

He'd expected Romana to be a bit frostier, if he was being honest.

He was fairly sure generals weren't allowed to slope off for four days in the middle of a war. But his old friend was positively genial.

'I've been on a little jaunt myself while you've been stuck in the TARDIS. Took out a Dalek munitions asteroid with Drax.'

The Doctor paused for a moment, tossing a leatherbound book from hand to hand. At length, he asked lightly. 'Capture you on materialisation, did they? As though they knew you were coming?'

Romana narrowed her eyes, lips pursing to ask the obvious question. The Doctor handed her the book, and she turned slowly to the page he'd marked.

'O for a Muse of fire! that would ascend
The brightest heaven of invention,
An empire for a stage, princes to act
And Daleks to behold the swelling scene!
Then should the warlike Davros, like himself,
Assume the port of Mars; and at his heels,
Leash'd in like hounds, should lasers, death and fire
Crouch for employment. But pardon, and gentles all,
The flat inferior species that have dared
On this unworthy scaffold to bring forth
So great an object: can this cockpit hold
The vasty fields of Skaro? or may we cram
Within this wooden O the very blasts
That did affright the air at Arcadia?'

'Shakespeare's *Davros V.* **Hasn't got a** *great* **ring to it, has it?'**

Romana slammed the book on her desk in rage. 'Is there nothing they won't destroy?'

'Precious little,' the Doctor agreed. 'That's not the point, though. They're in the Land of Fiction, their mere presence distorts texts. And they're presumably there because the Land's conceptual geography is adjacent to...'

'The Panatropic Net,' Romana finished. 'So everything we plan, and everything we could plan, they know?'

The Doctor shook his head emphatically, curls flying across his face.

'No no no, much worse than just the Matrix. Everything you even *write*. That's why I'm doing better than you lot – rogue element, you see. Probably why you and Drax got off that asteroid alive as well. I always knew you had it in you.'

Romana sat in her official chair, rubbing at her forehead. The Doctor watched her, a little curious. It struck him for almost the first time that his old friend really did lead the Universe's oldest civilisation, complete with millions of years' worth of super-weapons at her disposal. She was now putting together a *real* strategy, and not just about to suggest they try and contact the rebels in the woods. He felt such sadness as he watched her mentally wrestle with the problem, with her options, and hopefully with her conscience.

'What can we do?' she asked presently.

'I'll go in and see what's what. In the meantime, it's probably worth using a bit of misinformation. Suggest something *really* obtuse, like activating the N-forms, that sort of thing.'

Romana stiffened, noticing the Doctor's affable smile wasn't quite reaching his eyes. Those eyes were impassive and suddenly so very, very old. 'This war could destroy us all, Doctor. I have to explore all our options.'

'Gallifrey *will* pass, Romana. In this War or the next. You've been out there in the future with me. You *know* nothing's eternal. Safeguard our legacy, make sure Gallifrey is remembered throughout Time as we like to remember ourselves in ages past.'

Romana shivered at the sudden chill in the room, but stood straight. 'I shall do as I must. We're fighting Daleks, Doctor, an enemy you created. Now go and win the War.'

The Doctor shook his head sadly, and lowered himself into the lotus position on the thick carpet. 'Don't let anyone shave me,' he said as he took a thick paperback from his pocket and opened it in the middle.

'What?'

Gritting his teeth, the Doctor slammed the open book against his forehead, burying his nose in its gutter. His arms fell to his sides. The book remained, however, clamped to his face like a limpet.

At the sound of gurgling water, the Doctor opened his eyes, then screwed them up against the low February sun.

When he'd adjusted, he was pleased to see the broad plain he'd arrived in was full of rich lush greenery, in spite of the cold. A river snaked gently through the landscape, its bank just a dozen yards from where the Time Lord lay. He considered pulling his shoes off for a quick paddle, but it sounded as though it might be a bit deeper than it looked. A horse drank from the fast-moving water noisily. The Doctor rolled on to his stomach and smiled quietly as he watched waves of cold liquid break over the animal's slurping jaws.

'I am in love with moistness,' he mumbled, and tried to think universe-saving thoughts to avoid being beguiled into lying still for a century. Perhaps he should wander over to the shelter of one of the willow trees, the sky was looking a bit ominous...

'I say! What are *you* doing in my landscape?' The voice was strident and female, and the Doctor was on his feet and apologising before he realised there was no one there. The voice was all around: in the river, the towering clouds, his head, even the horse.

'Mary Ann Evans, I presume?' the Doctor said with a winning smile. 'Don't mind me, I was just admiring your scene-setting. I'm the Doctor.'

'Doctor?' the river said, shocked. 'I have no need for a physician until Mr Tulliver's illness, some several hundred pages hence!'

The voice paused on the bridge just before the mill that quietly drew on half an iota of the river's power through the unresting wheel sending out its diamond jets of water. 'I do not think you are he, however. Best you take your leave on the instant!'

Facing the mill, the Doctor tried again, more than a little put out. 'I'm afraid I need to get my bearings, and it's doubly difficult with you flitting around like that!'

No wonder the authorial voice is frowned on, **he thought. He thought this not because he was an unkind man – indeed, tales of his compassion were commonplace throughout the county – rather, because he was a man of science, and it is a regrettable fact of reliable observance that such natural philosophers often believe themselves to**

possess far keener critical faculties than those more artistically-minded souls they chance upon.

'Knock it off!' the Doctor protested loudly, startling a squadron of white ducks into the air with his outburst. The horse swallowed a mouthful of water before replying.

'What's the point of being an omniscient narrator if you can't stickybeak sometimes?'

The ducks landed just upstream, in a cluster of lengthening v-shaped ripples. 'I'm looking for Dalek infiltrators,' the Doctor said as calmly as he could. The river sighed.

'Oh, the *War*,' the bullrushes sang from the far bank. 'Just follow the ducks, they'll take you to an outpost. I did think of sending young Tom Tulliver off to the front line, but I doubt even plasma burns would whip that lad into shape.'

'Thank you,' said the Doctor cheerily, and set off after the ducks. His brow wrinkled as he took in the idyllic river meandering into the distance ahead of him. 'Are you sure you'll get a decent flash flood down here?'

'To drown that smug bastard? It's worth the exposition, every time.'

The Secret Keeper

Nick Campbell

Alistair Lethbridge-Stewart – housemaster, captain of the first XV and every Brendon schoolboy's favourite algebra master – had never much truck with space-time vehicles. He'd had had one close at hand for most of his career, and he suspected it was only its reassuring camouflage that had prevented him brooding on its possibilities.

But today he had no option but to climb aboard.

It had been a rather odd day all round. His boys were still three weeks off the end of Michaelmas term, but instead of drilling them in Pythagoras or on the playing field, he was back in his old H.Q., preparing for another reunion, more reminiscences that sounded ever more ludicrous as the years passed, more faces from the past that were strangely changed. Once, Lethbridge-Stewart had known a fella who changed his entire personality every once in a while and left the old one dead behind him: he'd begun to understand the appeal.

Then, of course, that fella had turned up too – a face from the past that hadn't changed – and the day had only grown odder. While he should have been attacking a smoked meat buffet in the mess, Lethbridge-Stewart had been trekking through the aptly named Death Zone, lobbing fireworks at abominable snowmen. Thank heavens, the Doctor had done something brilliant in the nick of time and now they could all go home.

Clutching the Doctor's ridiculous coat, he squared his jaw and strode briskly into the TARDIS.

He was surprised to find himself alone, with his original Doctor, all messy dark hair and a cologne of wine gums and chemistry sets.

'Where's everybody got to?' he asked, locating the hat-stand.

'Temporal fission,' the Doctor said jauntily. 'Old Rassilon was a clever old bean. Everyone's back in his or her TARDIS, heading off on their way. As are we…'

That familiar wheezing groaning of the engines began to sound. 'Well,' said Lethbridge-Stewart. 'Beats getting carted about in an alien pyramid, I suppose.'

'Alien pyramid? Whatever are you talking about?' The Doctor sounded only partly present as usual. A second later, he was all attention, peering wide-eyed at his old friend. 'Brigadier! How in the world did you get in here?'

Lethbridge-Stewart just stared back at him. 'Didn't I just ask you the same question?'

'You did?'

'Well, of course I did – and you replied, with some of your usual nonsense.'

'What did I say?' Only the Doctor could swing from remote to panic in the space of a second. 'Come on, Brigadier, this is no time to live up to your reputation. What was it?'

'Don't *you* **remember?'**

'Do you mean to say you weren't listening to me?'

'You're not the easiest man to follow once you get going, Doctor,' Lethbridge-Stewart replied. 'One tends to let the more technical details wash over one.' He frowned in concentration. 'Something about Rassilon being clever, was it? Everybody off in his own TARDIS.'

'His own TARDIS…' The Doctor stared into space, and probably time. 'No, it's no use. One of those multi-Doctor affairs, was it?'

'You really can't remember? But what about the –'

'No, don't!' The little man sounded stern for a second, then conciliatory. 'Sometimes we must let the Universe keep some of its secrets – if only so we can keep moving forward.'

'I'll bear that in mind.'

'Especially if going forward might mean going backwards. Think like a time traveller, Brigadier. I *wonder***…' An idea seemed to come to the little man, which he evidently wasn't about to share. He returned**

to his controls, and the room settled into silence. The central whatsit of the control thingumajig was moving, but the schoolmaster hadn't the first idea what that meant.

'I suppose,' he said, 'you don't remember where you picked me up, or when.'

'Of course I do,' said the Doctor. 'That drizzly old Friday in November.'

'And we're heading there now?'

'No,' said the little man, looking him in the eye. 'Actually, we're not.'

Lethbridge-Stewart's brow knit. 'Now, wait a moment –'

'Precisely what I was going to suggest. Circumstances have altered somewhat.'

'Typical! How many times have I heard your companions talk about your less-than-reliable piloting –'

'Outrageous!' The Doctor looked mortally offended. 'Jamie would never say such a thing!'

'I was thinking of Miss Gra–' The Brigadier bit his tongue, but the Doctor wasn't listening.

'Besides, that was before… Well, never mind that.' He broke off, pouting. 'The fact is, I can and will get you back for your speech. I was really rather looking forward to it! Though it does sound as if we had a sight more fun instead.'

'Still got to deliver it, though.'

'Of course,' said the Doctor. 'But you wouldn't say no to a quick pint beforehand, would you? Chance to get your breath back.'

Lethbridge-Stewart was just about to check his watch, when he realised the very act was idiotic. The thought gave him a sudden feeling of release he hadn't experienced in years. A pint and a catch-up? The prospect was appealing. It was all very well, knowing that those successive incarnations were all the same, undying Doctor, but when

one vanished it was (for the most part) permanently. It would be fitting to bid this one a proper farewell – not to mention have a rest and a pub lunch before returning to the fray.

'Quick stop off?' he said, and smiled. 'Why not?'

'Marvellous,' said the Doctor, pulling the door lever. Sunlight issued in from outside. 'After you, Brigadier. While we're here, I might have a suggestion or two for you.'

'Thank you,' Lethbridge-Stewart demurred, 'but I've got the thing pretty well memorised now, you understand.'

He stepped from the TARDIS into the honeyed air of British summertime. This did look promising: a string of thatched buildings in rural splendour, a Norman church and a village green where villagers were setting up a fair.

'Henry V was just the same,' grumbled his companion, contemplating their surroundings. 'Dreadful man. Now, if my calculations are correct, we should be in a little village called Camfield.'

'Looks right to me,' said Lethbridge-Stewart, scanning the view for a pub.

'According to my guidebook, there's supposed to be a stone circle – but that might not have been built yet…'

'Come along,' said Lethbridge-Stewart, sighting his quarry and striding off after it. 'Sun's over the yard arm, as they say.' He turned back to give his friend more encouragement. This was only supposed to be a short visit, after all. 'Aha!' he said. 'There's your stone circle.'

'What?'

'You've landed in it,' said Lethbridge-Stewart. 'Right in it, so to speak.'

The monoliths stood either side of the Police Box, continuing in a wide circle that seemed to enclose Camfield entirely, like a Neolithic electrical fence. Walking backwards, the Doctor smiled at the sight, then frowned bemusedly.

‘Just a pity you never fixed that trouble with your, ah, camouflage unit,’ Lethbridge-Stewart remarked. ‘You’ll have the Somerset Tourism Board down on you before you know it.’

‘Oh dear me, no,’ muttered the other man distractedly. ‘We sorted that out a long time back. Worked like a dream.’

‘Really?’ said Lethbridge-Stewart, surprised. ‘What happened?’

‘I spent two months looking for the blasted thing in Sherwood Forest, that’s what happened,’ said the Doctor. ‘I like things out in the open, Brigadier, you know that.’

‘Don’t overdo it, Doctor.’ He gave him a sidelong glance, and caught his friend doing the same, rather suspiciously.

The Doctor was up to something, as usual. Normally he reserved his Machiavellian business for the enemy, and let his friends bumble about on their own. On the other hand, it didn’t do to brood on such a lovely afternoon, with a fine looking pub – the View Over Atlantis – on the horizon. Judging by the villagers’ clothes, they were back in the 1960s – and he happened to remember the cost of a round in those days.

They were met on the green by a tall man with a clipboard. ‘Will-you-won’t-you-will-you-won’t-you, will you join the dance?’ he said, grinning. ‘We have costumes for all sizes, and musical instruments too.’

Lethbridge-Stewart saw the Doctor’s eyes light up.

‘Music? Hats?’ he said. ‘I’m in! Is it a wedding?’

‘Folk revival,’ said the man, professorially. ‘Didn’t you see my piece in the Camfield Herald? ‘Revivals of Pagan Ritual in the west country’. Or the parish noticeboard? We’re staging the lost folk dance of the –’

‘Not today, thank you,’ said Lethbridge-Stewart smartly. ‘I’m afraid we’re only staying briefly. And I happen to know this man gave up the recorder in 1973.’

They mollified the Professor by promising to cheer on his dancing when it got going, and proceeded into the pub, which was all Lethbridge-Stewart remembered pubs to be when he was young.

‘1973! Honestly! Five minutes in a new place and you’re chucking anachronisms about willy-nilly,’ said the Doctor, still eyeing the folk dancers.

‘You’re just tetchy because you wanted to join in,’ said Lethbridge-Stewart. ‘You always did like to involve yourself in things.’

‘Oh, you know me that well, do you?’ the Doctor muttered, reaching for his wallet. ‘Go and find a seat overlooking the green – and don’t wander off!’

That last instruction seemed hardly necessary; Lethbridge-Stewart had never identified more with one of the Doctor’s long-suffering companions. Still, he couldn’t honestly say that he minded. The past was as golden as he remembered, and the pastoral duties of Brendon seemed as far off as the winter weather.

‘You can’t blame me for being curious,’ the Doctor said, returning with a pint of bitter and ginger beer respectively. ‘On my planet it’s unheard of to even acknowledge that time passes. Celebrating the seasons, new year – it’s important stuff.’

‘Hmm,’ said the ex-soldier. ‘Can’t say I think much of the get-up.’ He was watching a couple of strange figures wandering around the green. They looked like nothing less than oversized corn dollies. Sheaves of straw were tied round heads and limbs till nothing human was visible. Lethbridge-Stewart had long grown suspicious of anything without eyes. ‘Not exactly ‘with it’, given the era.’

‘Call me sentimental,’ said the other man, ‘but I picked the 1960s specially.’

‘Oh? Why?’

‘It’s where we met,’ said the Doctor, clinking his glass. ‘A long time ago for you, I know. How’s life treated you since then?’

‘Not sure I ought to say,’ replied Lethbridge-Stewart. ‘Especially after my earlier indiscretion. You make the laws of time sound like the Official Secrets Act.’

‘Oh, I don’t mind,’ said the Doctor. ‘As long as it doesn’t concern me.’

Lethbridge-Stewart, floundering at the prospect, took solace in his pint, but the other man was waiting patiently. 'Well,' he said cautiously, 'I did run into you again, of course – but don't worry. He, or rather you, told me very little about your own affairs –'

The Doctor appeared to force a smile. 'Jolly good.'

'—apart from your trial –'

'Ah.'

'—and your exile. He was particularly bitter about that.'

The Doctor's voice was filled with apprehension. 'Brigadier,' he said, 'There are some rules of time even I would hesitate before breaking.'

'But this is my point. Is that in the past,' Lethbridge-Stewart pressed him, 'or the future? Your past, I mean – or think I do. You mentioned it earlier, you know, your trial.'

'I'm not surprised,' said the Time Lord. 'It's never off my mind. A rotten show trial and – and then, sending Zoe and Jamie away, and erasing me from their memories!'

'I am sorry. But what about your exile?'

'That's a little trickier,' said the Doctor. 'You see, I was offered an alternative. Well, offered is hardly the word. I was scarcely in a position to turn it down.'

'Turn down what?'

'I work for the Time Lords nowadays,' the Doctor said, baldly. 'They send me into the secret parts of history, the ambiguous bits. I – clear up matters there for them.'

'So that's how you got your TARDIS working ship-shape,' said Lethbridge-Stewart, affecting to carve up a pork pie. 'Poacher turned gamekeeper, eh?'

'It was that or be exiled,' said the little man hotly. 'Live chronologically, here? An ordinary life! Good heavens, no.'

'It might not be that bad,' said Lethbridge-Stewart. 'At least you'd

be your own man.'

'If I had given up the TARDIS,' said the Doctor, 'we might never have had this reunion at all. But come along, Brigadier, that's enough about me. What happened with UNIT after we saw off the Cybermen?'

It was a strange conversation. Lethbridge-Stewart pleaded a hazy memory. He was certain the Doctor still had a few secrets of his own, but that was nothing to the Scheherazade series of tales he had to keep to himself. In a funny sort of way, Lethbridge-Stewart felt their roles had been reversed for the day: he was the paternal, enigmatic man in a responsible position. Even so, the pair of them talked comfortably for hours, their friendship unaffected by such ephemeral matters as time and space. The Doctor bought ploughman's lunches and more drinks. A queer procession was now dancing around the green. It looked like all the village had joined in, wearing home-made costumes and peculiar animal masks in papier-mâché, while drums were beat and songs were sung. The sun dipped toward the horizon and the pub had emptied. Even the Straw Bears, as the Doctor referred to them, had strolled off somewhere.

'I'm glad we caught up with one another again,' said the Doctor.

'Particularly as we seem to have survived the experience,' said Lethbridge-Stewart. 'Good to know one can still rise to the challenge, isn't it, after all these years?'

'Exactly what I've been thinking!' said the Doctor triumphantly. 'You don't want to go back to boring old school-life right away, do you?'

'No, can't say that I –' He blinked. 'What are you getting at?'

'Well.' The Doctor cast an anxious look around him. 'After – whatever happened with the other me's – you and I were put back in my TARDIS.'

'Of course.'

'Only we didn't arrive that way, did we? Everything that happened – whatever did happen – is beyond the purview of my lot. As far as they're concerned, I've vanished off their radar altogether.'

Lethbridge-Stewart wondered if this would make any more sense without three pints of real ale inside him. 'Are you saying you've given them the slip?'

An impish smile spread across the Doctor's features by way of reply.

'Well,' said Lethbridge-Stewart, 'what now?'

'Whatever I please! I'm a free man! I can pilot the TARDIS, go and visit all my old friends, investigate a few mysteries…'

'You really are beyond redemption, aren't you?'

'I hope so!' The Doctor grabbed his shoulder. 'Fancy joining me?'

Lethbridge-Stewart nearly choked on his pickled onion. 'What?'

'We make a fine team. Why not do it all again?'

'But we – you – I – surely there are rules against such things.'

'Oh yes,' said the Doctor cheerfully, 'but that's the beauty of it. This will be strictly off the record. Nobody will ever know of our exploits.'

'Good lord,' said Lethbridge-Stewart. The hairs had stood up on the backs of his hands. He saw again the meaningless watch on his wrist, the grey skies of 1983. 'If you'd asked me only yesterday, you know, I'd have turned you down flat…'

The Doctor's clapped his hands together. 'Oh, I haven't been so excited in centuries! I never thought you'd say yes!'

'I'll need to pop back to Brendon for a few things, of course – and I really ought to give that speech. They've waited long enough…'

'Ah – that's out of the question, I'm afraid. They'll be looking for me there. The game will be up!'

'You mean I have to go on the run with you, as of now?'

'Life on the road, Brigadier,' grinned the Doctor. 'Two cosmic vagabonds. Though you'll have hot and cold running water in the TARDIS, of course, and if it should pack up, we only have to drop into Bath in the 18th century, or the sapphire waterfalls of Metebelis 3. I've

always wanted to go there!'

'I feel somewhat as if I were being pressganged,' said Lethbridge-Stewart.

'But you are coming along with me?'

Lethbridge-Stewart folded his arms, considered, then nodded. So, he had left his adventuring behind, had he? Well!

The fair on the green was in full flow as they finished up their drinks and set off back to the village's dark perimeter. The stars were out and the air smelled sweet. Lethbridge-Stewart even lit up a cigarette, much to the Doctor's chagrin. 'Brigadier!

'You really ought to stop calling me that,' he replied. 'We're not in the army now.'

'I can hardly start calling you Mr Lethbridge-Stewart,' the Doctor replied. 'I sound like a schoolboy.'

'How appropriate…!'

Although Lethbridge-Stewart had travelled widely in his youth, and enjoyed a trek up to the Highlands now and again, he had never before seen himself as the sort of man to racket around in the Doctor's capricious machine. But the world had grown smaller: sometimes it shrunk to the size of a rugger pitch. All these years, the foreign affairs of alien beings, benevolent or otherwise, had shaped his life – and how often he'd worried for the lives of the TARDIS crew, hearing of their experiences in these queer places, and imagined himself there to protect them. What was it they said, about the sins of omission? Today he lived a bachelor schoolmaster's life, and perhaps he'd do so again, when he was ready to settle down. For the time being, the open road was his mistress, the battered blue Police Box his abode.

There was only one problem. The Police Box in question was gone.

'Oh, my giddy aunt!'

'Never mind your aunt,' said Lethbridge-Stewart. 'What's happened to your box?'

'Don't ask me!' exclaimed the Doctor. 'I'm as surprised as you are.'

‘I knew I should have gone back with one of your other incarnations. You’ve stranded us!’

‘Keep a cool head,’ said the Doctor, fanning himself with his handkerchief. ‘We must approach this scientifically.’

‘I can’t help taking things a little more personally than that, Doctor,’ said the other man. ‘Look!’ He pulled a single straw from the Police Box-sized indentation. ‘It’s those folk dance people. They must have monitored our conversation. They’ve stolen the TARDIS.’

‘Possibly…’

‘Well, it didn’t grow legs and walk away – or could it?’

‘There is a Displacement System when the TARDIS is threatened, but I don’t see where any Hostile Action would come from, do you?’

‘I know where it might come from soon,’ Lethbridge-Stewart retorted. ‘What more evidence do you need?’

‘What more evidence do we have? Consider the henge, for example.’

Lethbridge-Stewart’s head swivelled back and forth. ‘The stones! They’re gone too! Were they aliens in disguise? Illusions?’

‘I’d have a much better idea if you stopped talking for a minute.’

‘You might think that – I couldn’t possibly comment.’ He turned back to look at the village. ‘I’m going to call in reinforcements.’

‘And how are you going to do that? Smoke signals?’

‘There’s a phone-box in the village, by the Post Office.’ He looked at the Doctor. ‘What year is this? Do we have UNIT yet?’

‘Oh, let’s not open that can of worms.’

‘There’ll be someone. We’ll have this thing nipped in the bud before breakfast. I hate to say this,’ he added, ‘but tonight I actually have more experience in this sort of thing than you do, old chap.’

‘Thank you. I didn’t think I could get any more dispirited, but there we are.’ The Doctor stuffed his handkerchief in his pocket. ‘Alright,

let's go.'

'Excellent.'

'Perhaps our archaeologist can shed light on the problem,' he said, marching off.

'We're talking about a threat to the local populace,' said Lethbridge-Stewart, jogging to keep up with him. 'Not the Sunday Times crossword puzzle.'

They parted at the village crossroads. Left alone, the erstwhile Brigadier was more than glad of the sight of Gilbert Scott's enduringly cosy red telephone box, standing with solitary dignity on the street corner.

The only number that came to mind was actually his own desk phone in Kings Cross. The Doctor doesn't need to know, he thought.

A low voice followed a short burst of static. 'Who is this?'

Lethbridge-Stewart pushed button A. 'I prefer to withhold my identity for now,' he said. 'I have intelligence for someone senior in Defence. Code-word: Bakerloo.'

'Intelligence…?' There was further static on the line. In the long pause, nearby branches tapped the booth's glass panels. The voice continued, in a hoarse whisper. 'But your voice – surely you are known to us….?'

'We'll come to that later. Listen, I'm in Somerset –'

'Colonel Lethbridge-Stewart, isn't it?'

He was about to correct them on the matter of his rank, but stopped just in time. 'Yes, it's me. Please put me through to Defence at once. Something's going on…'

'Well, well…' The thin voice chuckled softly. 'Ill met by moonlight, Lethbridge-Stewart.'

Branches rapped the glass, hard – curious for such a still night. Curiouser still for a box standing alone on a corner. Lethbridge-Stewart spun round and gaped at the sight of a Straw Bear, huge arm

upraised. From the receiver, the thin voice cackled.

'Please hold…!'

Lethbridge-Stewart covered his face just in time, as the Straw Bear smashed a window and groped horribly for his throat. Thinking quickly, he lassoed the phone cord tightly around its arm. Kicking the door open, he staggered outside.

With a great crack, the Bear wrenched the phone free of its concrete. Whoever was wearing that get-up must be fit, thought Lethbridge-Stewart. Considerably more than I am.

Liberated, it advanced, clutching at him with twiggy fingers. There was no time to lose. Lethbridge-Stewart was unarmed – but his mind flashed onto the disposable lighter in his pocket. As the weird figure loomed over him, he held the flame to its outstretched hand. In seconds the straw had caught. The thing wheeled in confusion. Something about the body language was familiar to Lethbridge-Stewart.

He whipped his raincoat behind its knees and pulled its feet out from under it. It landed like a tree falling in a storm.

A silver sphere went flying from amidst the debris.

'Great Scott,' said Lethbridge-Stewart, picking it up.

Feeling a mixture of vindication and excitement, he stepped over the prone Straw Bear and headed for the village green. The music had stopped. Presumably, while he had been tussling with the monstrous unknown, the Doctor had been sorting things out with a genius idea. How extremely disappointing.

The villagers were still foregathered. A disconcerting assemblage of folk costumes, masks and glazed expressions. There was the TARDIS too, and the stones of the henge, rearranged round the maypole. It was a stout maypole, and lashed to it, staring down the business end of a dagger with quiet apprehension, was Doctor 2.

'I'm afraid you've arrived somewhat after the fact, Brigadier,' he said, dryly.

'Sorry about that. My call was intercepted,' he replied.

The villagers' focus remained on the Time Lord at the centre of the circle, while the Straw Bears wove busily amongst them. Lethbridge-Stewart peered at the figurehead, the one waving a dagger about. Dash it if it didn't turn out to be the archaeologist chap in a long raven wig. He was absorbed in an old song about how summer was icumen in.

'As you see, our friend is rather hands on,' said the Doctor.

'I have reason to believe he's possessed,' said Lethbridge-Stewart.

'Nothing would surprise me at this stage. Have you noticed the maypole I'm tied to?'

'It does rather draw the eye.'

'It's a telephone mast,' said the Doctor. 'The Straw Bears are linking its wires to the stone circle. It must have been working as a crude astronomical radio interferometer, superposing electromagnetic data from outer space. The Professor is focusing the reception using the village's combined psychical array.'

'I see.'

'I'm not arguing about that now,' said the Doctor, growing flustered. 'If you wouldn't mind interceding at this critical point –'

The Professor raised his dagger high.

Lethbridge-Stewart didn't fancy his chances with the acolytes. He was out of practice – the only action he saw these days was refereeing uncoordinated teenagers on the rugby pitch.

Dammit, he thought. That might do it!

He hauled the sphere out of his pocket, closed one eye and hurled the wretched thing. It connected with the Professor's skull with an audible crack. He broke off mid-chorus, swayed on the balls of his feet – and fell to the ground. He left the dagger where it had stuck, deep in the Doctor's white shirt: not white now, but crimson. The little man's head was bowed, his long fringe hanging low and dark.

The crowd screamed, their psychic union suddenly ruptured.

Lethbridge-Stewart couldn't speak or move, could hardly even

draw breath. He was filled with a strange horror of apprehension, unlike anything other than his first realisation, years before in the London Underground, that impossible things might not be so impossible as we wish them to be.

He had been too late.

The villagers milled about, the Straw Bears making cumbersome efforts to corral them back in place. With no-one in charge, it was unclear what order could be imposed on the chaos.

One minute too late.

The Doctor's head rolled groggily upward, and he blinked as if coming round from an afternoon nap. He took in the scene around him, widened his eyes meaningfully at Lethbridge-Stewart, then looked down at the knife. 'Ouch!' he said.

He was impossible, thought Lethbridge-Stewart. Simply impossible.

'Doctor!' he bellowed. 'Are you – that is, I thought –'

'Not now,' groaned the Doctor. 'Untie me, quick. My circulation's bad enough as it is.'

Lethbridge-Stewart darted in like a keen fullback going for a try, and set to at the Doctor's bonds with shaking hands. At their feet the Professor's eyes flickered open. He looked frightful, his mouth moving grotesquely.

'Colonel Lethbridge-Stewart!' he hissed. 'The very stars ordain our meeting!'

'With a little help from this man,' said Lethbridge-Stewart. 'He brought me here specially to see you. Didn't you, Doctor? Something to whet my appetite for an adventuring life, I'll wager. Look where it got you…'

'Leave him then. Join me! I'll make you my warlord!'

'Can't say I'm tempted,' said Lethbridge-Stewart. 'I'm not a military man these days, and now I think of it, I like it.'

'Will you two stop gossiping and focus,' muttered the Doctor,

clutching his side. 'This is the last time I organise a surprise for you!'

The Professor drew breath for a furious retort, but his low whisper was drowned out by the groan and crashing of the maypole, as the two men shouldered it over. Wires twanged loose from stones. Straw Bears toppled all over the place.

Lethbridge-Stewart saw that the Doctor was actually smiling at it all, albeit rather wanly (the projecting knife-handle made him feel rather queasy). The revels were over. The villagers were regaining their self-possession. A local GP attended to the Professor. A jolly sounding landlord directed everyone back to the View Over Atlantis to recover.

But Lethbridge-Stewart had definitely had enough for one day.

'Time to go, Doctor,' he said. 'You are up to driving?'

'A bandage and a pot of tea and I'll be right as rain,' replied the Doctor, fitting his key in the TARDIS door. 'Perhaps we might go and recuperate in Edinburgh –'

'First and last,' said Lethbridge-Stewart, 'I'm going to that reunion in 1983.'

The Doctor paused on the threshold. 'You've changed your mind, then.'

'I'm not the man I once was,' he replied. 'My talent lies elsewhere nowadays.'

'You know what this means for me,' said the Doctor, spinning round, his eyes wild. 'I'll have to go back – or else…!' He staggered woozily, overcome by his own fervour and the Professor's attack.

'You'll think of a way out,' said Lethbridge-Stewart, supporting him. 'Or I don't know you…'

The Doctor disappeared off into the depths of his time machine for the duration of their flight. His face was white and for the first time, Lethbridge-Stewart saw signs of his great age. Years had evidently passed between his trial and his exile, though thinking of all these secrets made his head spin.

Now, bent over the controls, the Doctor looked unassuming as ever.

The temptation to re-join him remained strong, but Lethbridge-Stewart had to resist, even if he could never give his real reason. Earlier it had looked as if they had really lost the Doctor; he couldn't afford for that to happen, not now.

He remembered meeting the Doctor again, the first time, in that hospital, back in the seventies. A stranger's face, smiling in recognition. It was his duty to guard that moment in time. Heaven only knew what would happen if it was displaced from the history books.

'Here we are,' said the Doctor. 'You've only been gone five minutes.'

'If only that were true,' said Lethbridge-Stewart. 'I feel I've been on my feet for days.'

'Nonsense. Good for the heart. I should know,' said the Doctor, casually brushing straw from his lapel.

'Coming with me?'

'No, you'd better go it alone. I have my own case to put to my superiors.'

'If you did accept that, ah, exile…' said Lethbridge-Stewart awkwardly, pulling on his mac. 'That is, if you're in the area – look me up, won't you?'

'Oh you'll be the first to hear from me. Depend on it!'

The Brigadier gave him one last smile, turned and walked out the door.

The sight that met his eyes stopped him in his tracks. 'Jehosophat!' he cried.

'What is it, Brigadier?'

From the mansion that housed UNIT HQ, gunfire and unearthly noises resounded in the winter air. A green tentacle waggled aggressively through one of the chimney-pots.

The housemaster glanced back into the Police Box. 'Another bout of

the usual, I think. No rest for the wicked.' He hid a smile. 'Well, then. Here we go again…'

Doctor Who and the Viking

Kara Dennison

“Doctor, I feel sick.”

“That'll be the sub-aural waves coming off the planet's surface. There's a paper bag in the drawer under the panel to your left.”

Clara braced herself against the console – all she'd asked for was a casual fly-by of Mars, just to grab a photo for a student who'd been tracking Curiosity's Twitter. The Doctor had nixed her initial request to bring the student along, and she had to admit now she was glad he had. “Lovely, thanks. Why aren't they affecting you?”

The Doctor peered at the monitor in front of him. “Who says they're not? It's affected my balance and I have a slight twinge behind my left eye. I'm lucky to be vertical.”

“You poor thing.”

“Almost homed in on the epicentre.” He swung the screen around to Clara and darted off in the direction of his work bench. “Clara, read off the coordinates while I find my destabiliser.”

Clara watched the numbers on the screen spin down and resolve over the view of coppery soil below them. “22.697 degrees north by 48.222 degrees west.”

“Sounds familiar. Why does that sound familiar?” The Doctor looked over his shoulder, tinkering with a device about the size of a dinner plate and several times more elaborate. “That should be right in the Chryse Planitia. Is there anything there?”

“Yeah, there's a spacecraft. White, 'bout the size of a small car, satellite dish sticking out the top.”

The Doctor tucked the device under one arm. “What? No. No, no. That can't be right. That little thing?” He pulled the screen back around. “That shouldn't be transmitting anything. It's harmless. That's a harmless spacecraft. It's the neutered dog of spacecraft.”

“What is?”

“That.” The Doctor poked a long finger at the screen. “The Viking 1. But that's not possible. It's purely experimental. It was just there to take photos and samples. Bits of it didn't even *work* right.”

He shoved the device he'd been holding unceremoniously into Clara's arms and began punching buttons. “Ah, well. Just means it'll be that much easier to go in and snip a connector or two.”

The TARDIS shuddered as it started to materialise next to the lander – then was flung straight out from it sideways by something like a shock wave. The Doctor and Clara were thrown against the railings around the console, the device careening out of Clara's hands and crashing into a far wall.

“I don't think it wants us here,” Clara said weakly from the floor as the TARDIS attempted to steady itself, still bumped up and down by the waves like a tiny cork in a Jacuzzi. The Doctor was finally starting to look a little green around the gills himself.

“We're not going to be able to get any closer,” he rasped. “The waves are keeping everything out. But why? What is it accomplishing? It shouldn't even be operational.” He sat down, clinging to the railing and biting on his thumbnail, seemingly more distraught by the not-knowing than the bobbing motion.

Clara steadied herself on the console, but was thrown off again when the Doctor leaped to his feet.

“I'll have to get a closer look.”

“You just said you *can't,*” Clara protested. “And, er, I'm not sure I want to go on that ride again.”

The Doctor flapped a hand in the air, shaking his head. “No, no, no. Not closer. *Closer.”*

Clara inhaled, counted to three, and exhaled. “All right. Still doesn't make sense.”

“Think about it, Clara. The one person in the universe who'll have had access to every part of the Viking landers. What does every big team project need?”

“Well... a troubleshooter.” She paused. “So we're going to go talk to the Viking troubleshooter?”

“No.” The Doctor launched the TARDIS off to its next destination – mid-1975, by the looks of it – grinning widely. “I'm going to *be* him.”

Dust as far as the eye could see, red and undisturbed and baking in the sun. And rocks, so many rocks, ranging in from the north and disappearing off to the south again. Akilah exhaled slowly.

Yep. This was Colorado.

There'd been a call to the lab saying the consultant from NASA Langley was en route from the airport and would be there in ten minutes. That was half an hour ago. Thinking the van might have broken down halfway there in the heat, Akilah had volunteered to drive out.

She was nearly to the airport now, and still no sign of any vehicle. Though there was a hitchhiker up ahead. She peered through the windshield. No, two; one was so tall he'd been blocking her view of the other one. Against her better judgment, she pulled over. The taller of the two – a man, grey-haired, inexplicably bundled up in a hoodie and Crombie coat – darted forward immediately and rapped on the passenger-side window until she leaned across to roll it down. He shoved his head into the car unceremoniously.

“Are you with NASA?”

“I... yeah. Akilah Abraham. Are you-”

“Ah!” He pulled his head out again and turned to his friend. “This'll be our ride.” He reached in and unlocked the passenger-side door, tilting the seat forward as his friend – a petite young woman in high-heeled boots already caked with red dust – scrambled into the back seat.

“Hey, hey!”

“You're picking up the consultant from Langley, yes?” This from the man. “For the Viking project.”

Akilah narrowed her eyes at the man. “Yeah. I'm picking up Charlie Victor. We lost track of him.”

The man clicked the seat back into place and sat down, motioning to himself grandly. “Congratulations, you have regained track of him.”

“You're not Charlie Victor.”

“I am!”

“Charlie is five-six and Lebanese.”

The man twisted his mouth into an awkward smile, which melted into an almost offended glare. “Fine. Fine, I'm not Charlie Victor. He's been detained. I didn't want to distress you.”

“Not doing a very good job,” the woman muttered with a long-suffering smile.

Akilah snapped her head back. “Detained?”

“Yeah, ah...” The man appeared distracted. “Call from home. Something about his sons and a runaway sailboat. No idea.” He fumbled in an inner pocket of his jacket, producing a small leather wallet and flipping it open in Akilah's face. “I can assure you, I'm highly qualified.”

Dr. John Smith, UNIT scientific adviser. But the photo was clearly of someone else. She grabbed the wallet for a closer look.

Wait, no. It *was* him. But she'd been sure-

“Good? Good. No time to waste, then. They'll be expecting me.” Dr. Smith snatched the wallet back and tucked it away again.

Akilah sorted through a few potential responses in her head – but Dr. Smith was waving at her and tapping his heel rapidly like an impatient child. So she shuffled them all to the back of her mind and made a U-turn, kicking up red dust in their wake.

“And who are you?” she asked the woman in the back seat, tempering her tone as much as possible. “I wasn't told about a second person.”

“Clara Oswald.” The woman's sharp, sparkling eyes met Akilah's in the rear-view mirror, and she smiled. “Trust me, after five minutes with him you'll be glad I'm here.”

“Cig's not going to be happy,” Akilah said under her breath – but not so quietly that she wasn't positive they couldn't hear her over the rumble of the Chevy's engine. “The project manager,” she added.

Dr. Smith raised an eyebrow, tilting his head languidly in her direction. “Not a fan of surprises?”

Akilah shook her head. “He's not a fan of having someone over his shoulder in the first place, and now instead of our usual guy it's gonna be... well, you two.”

“Ah. A pair of total strangers. I suspect we'll get to spend the afternoon going through one of your delightful background checks.”

An unpleasant pang. “Dr. Smith, it's not that-”

“Just call me Doctor. I expect I'll be the only proper one.” The Doctor flashed Akilah a cocky grin that might have looked sinister in a slightly different light.

Akilah fell silent for the rest of the drive. *Just stick to the mission,* **she told herself.** *Stay to the plans. What can a pair of strangers do?*

In the rear-view mirror, she could see Clara Oswald's eyes still on her, as though assessing her.

Cig wasn't happy.

“Oh, *hell* **no.” He threw the Doctor's wallet straight back at him, hitting him in the chest. The Doctor fumbled it back into his grip, his expression darkening bit by bit until he looked ready to boil over.**

“Something wrong with our credentials?” Clara piped up, putting a placating hand on the Doctor's arm. “I think a UNIT adviser is more than qualified to oversee things here.”

“Oh, I'll bet you do.” Cig gritted his teeth, directing his attention back to the Doctor. “You just can't leave us be, can you? How many times have you people made it to Mars? Five? Six? And now we're getting our first shot at it and you just can't resist getting your fingers in it. You promised you'd stay out of this mission.”

The Doctor blinked, wide-eyed. “Did I?”

“Did he... Yes, you *did.*” And Cig shoved past the Doctor, striding toward a phone hanging on the far wall of the conference room and commencing dialing a rather long number. “More than qualified...”

“Like I was going to say,” Akilah said in a low voice. “It's not that you're not vetted. NASA's just been... looking forward to getting something up there. We were hoping to do this on our own. Not with England over our shoulder.”

The Doctor scowled petulantly. “I've been to Mars *far* more than six times.”

“Shush,” breathed Clara.

Cig's shouting echoed through the back of the room. “Yes, it *is* important, as a matter of fact... Well, whoever's most in charge... I don't care *what* time it is, just put him on!”

“Um...” Akilah swallowed. “The rest of the team is in the construction shop if you'd like to go there first.”

“Why don't we?” Clara suggested brightly, tugging the Doctor along by the sleeve. “Sounds like Cig might be here awhile.”

“Yes.” The Doctor darted a look back at Cig. “I'd like to have a look at everything unencumbered.”

Hesitantly, Akilah waved the two visitors after her out of the room, closing the door after them. On the far side of the room, Cig was still raging across the Atlantic into the phone.

“... I don't know what you think you're doing, Captain... oh, sorry. *Brigadier.* But we have our *own* scientific advisers, and we don't take kindly to you sending... What?... What are you asking *me* for? You should know...” Cig leaned against the wall, pressing his free hand to his face. “Smith. John Smith. Wants everyone to call him 'Doctor.' He... what's so funny?... Why are y-... Hello??”

Cig stared at the receiver, baffled, and finally hung up.

“Akilah, the experiment in Room 7-”

Akilah waved off the young technician. “I'll handle it later. No one's gone in, correct? Including you?”

“Correct.”

“Good. Any disturbance could compromise my test results.” She turned to the Doctor. “Well, here they are.”

“Ah, perfect.” The Doctor rubbed his hands together as he approached one of the gleaming white landers, leaning sideways a bit to look underneath. “What is it, two months to launch?”

Akilah nodded. “August for the first one, September for the second.”

“And how're they looking?”

“Charlie didn't give you his reports?”

The Doctor raised his head, blinking owlishly at Akilah. “Ah. It helps me to hear everything aloud.” He fluttered a hand next to one ear. “Also helps to hear if there are any discrepancies between your stories and his.” There was that slow-release smile again: charming at first glance, but oddly threatening if you stared a bit too long.

“Uh. Well.” Akilah swallowed. *Stay focused.* **“Actually, we're a bit behind. We were calibrating the instruments, and the centre of gravity on this one is an inch off.”**

“Fortunately, you have me here. Clara, my instrument.”

“Hardly seems the time for a concert.”

The Doctor straightened his back, shooting Clara a long, blank stare. “I mean these,” he snapped, whipping a pair of sunglasses from his pocket.

“If you have them, why are you asking me for them?”

“Can't even read the mood of a scene, can you?” He shoved the sunglasses on unceremoniously and tapped the centre of them, leaning close to the lander. “Aha. Well, that was a bit silly of you. No matter.”

Akilah couldn't see around the Doctor as he hunched forward with his back to her, but she heard an odd buzzing sound, followed by a clank deep within the lander. She jumped at him, grabbing him by the shoulder “What are you doing!?”

“Fixing your problem.” The Doctor jerked away, rubbing his shoulder as if Akilah's touch had burned him. “I think you'll find I've saved you a great deal of time. You're welcome.”

A long stare.

“Get it up on the table and give it a spin,” Akilah snapped at one of the technicians, then turned her direction back to the Doctor. “But next time, *ask,* would you? You can't just go moving things around-”

“Fah. As long as it weighs the same, no one will care, right?”

Akilah pursed her lips. “Right... But...”

The Doctor took his sunglasses off and slipped them into an inner jacket pocket. “Good. Now. Tell me, which bit is the doomsday device?”

“Doctor...” Clara tugged the Doctor's sleeve, and the two stepped aside for a low-voiced, highly animated discussion. Finally the two came back, Clara standing slightly in front of the Doctor.

“Akilah? How about we leave the Doctor to give this thing a once-over? He, er, works better uninterrupted.”

Akilah looked around nervously, nodding to two technicians nearby. “They stay.”

“Oh, of course. But there are a few things I'm really quite curious about. Could we...” She nodded toward the exit.

The Doctor watched as the two women exited, then raised an eyebrow at one of the technicians. “So, maybe *you* can tell me which bit is the doomsday device.”

“You weren't kidding about the whole not-being-pleased bit.” Clara waved a hand in front of her face and coughed.

“Oh, sorry.” Akilah dropped her cigarette and ground it out under her heel. “Didn't know it'd bother you.”

Clara shook her head. “Just... a bit less common where I'm from is all.”

“You can't just look at something and change the CG, by the way.

I'm not sure what your friend pulled back there, but we don't have time for pranks."

"If he says it's fixed, it's fixed." Clara smiled tightly. "He acts a bit of a know-it-all, but he's right more often than not. As irritating as that is."

Akilah laughed. "He'll fit right in here, then. A dozen of the smartest people in aeronautics, all convinced they're smarter than each other and none of them wanting to be told otherwise."

Clara winced. "So, er, what's your job here?"

"Ah, well. Remember I said before that Cig's the project manager?"

Clara nodded.

"Technically we're joint project managers. He's my husband."

Oh, I'm sorry. **Fortunately, the thought remained a thought, and Clara just responded with an "Ah."**

"We share the work. I get things done, and he gets angry."

Clara chuckled. "I'm sure that's a lot of help."

"Well, and we've each got our own experiments. I'm handling a spectroscope to examine the local rock formations, and Cig's handling the GCMS to identify chemicals in the soil. Though he tends to keep his work to himself."

"Keeps it to himself? Isn't he supposed to be, I don't know, getting troubleshooting done to make sure it works?"

Akilah shrugged. "He's stubborn, is Cig. He doesn't like being told he's done something wrong."

"I suppose I can understand that," Clara offered. "I mean, this is a world-changing mission, isn't it?"

"That's the plan."

"So, er... What *was* the background check like?"

"You know?" Akilah laughed. "There wasn't one, really. Rights of

foreign nationals and all that. Guess they didn't want to waste time vetting a bunch of nerds digging for rocks."

Clara nodded slowly. "Mm. So really *anyone* could get in."

"Like you and your friend?"

"Ah-"

Akilah folded her arms. "He's not just troubleshooting, is he? He acts like he's looking for something."

Clara shrugged. "Well, we... may have... heard that there was some extraneous equipment on the lander."

"That's ridiculous," Akilah snapped.

"I know!" Clara agreed in a mollifying tone. "But you know these clever types, won't rest 'til every question is answered... So, if there *was* anything 'off,' you'd tell us. Right?"

Akilah side-eyed Clara quietly. "Clara Oswald, you are extremely bad at this."

Clara smiled. "Bad at what?"

The side-eye continued for a moment; then Akilah pushed herself forward off the wall. "Why don't you go check in with your friend? See if he and Cig have killed each other yet. I have something to do."

Clara watched as Akilah turned and went back inside, letting the heavy door slam behind her. She waited the space of a few breaths, then followed.

She was just in time to see Akilah turn a corner into a side hallway. Silently, Clara crept behind her, watching as Akilah looked in all directions before sliding into a small conference room and locking the door behind her.

Clara held her breath and peered up through the small, rectangular window in the heavy door. She could see Akilah from the back, standing in front of a long table and unwrapping something about four feet long shrouded in a heavy tarpaulin. Akilah murmured something, but it was muffled by the heavy door between them; then she removed

what looked like a fancy tuning fork from her pocket, struck it on the edge of the table, and held it up to whatever she had unwrapped.

There was a high-pitched wail, a screech... and Clara saw.

"If it's the same on one, it's the same on the other! That's how it *works!"*

The Doctor tapped the body of the second lander. "Identical in every way, you say. Except the CG isn't off on this one. If they're identical, why don't I have to correct anything on *this* **one?"**

Cig glared. "I don't *know."*

"If something's even a hair's breadth off, it could destroy some of your planet's greatest discoveries. You ought to be more worried than you are. Especially since..." The Doctor grabbed a thick stack of papers. "... everyone else's data is right here and accounted for." He riffled through the pages quickly. "Funny, you're so proud of your experiments, but you're not ready to let anyone else have a look."

"Don't tell me it took you *that* **long to read an entire stack of papers."**

The Doctor removed his sunglasses. "Yes, well, I seize up a bit under pressure." He tapped his palm against one side of the heavy sheaf. "It's ridiculous. You're the only person on this team who can't stand the thought of someone else seeing his work? What are you afraid of, eh?"

"I don't *need* **checking!" Cig snapped. "Everything I've done has passed every damn test. You don't need to know more."**

The Doctor side-eyed Cig before turning his attention back to the papers. "No one else seems insulted by the idea of sharing their work. Seismograph, spectroscope, Pyrolitic Release, gas ex-" He halted mid-word, his eyes widening. "That didn't belong."

Cig snorted. "Oh, what is it *this* **time?"**

"Shut up, shut up. What did I say?"

"You do *not* **tell me to-"**

The Doctor turned on Cig, teeth clenched. "Shut *up!"*

For the first time in his life, Cig shut up.

"Something didn't belong. I said a word that doesn't belong in there. What was it?" The Doctor flipped through the papers frantically. "Where are you, where are you..." He stopped, jamming a fingertip down on a page. "Spectroscope. Why is there a spectroscope?"

Cig stared.

"Oh, you can *talk,"* the Doctor scoffed as he examined the spectroscope on top of the second lander, turning it gently in a few different directions. "Do we have to Simon Says the whole thing? Talk."

A grunt, and Cig spoke as the Doctor walked across the room to examine the first lander again. "Akilah's doing some observations of rock formations. We can transmit signals to position the spectroscope in whichever direction we want to look."

"Aha." The Doctor put his hand on the instrument in question, pushing and pulling. "Then why is the spectroscope on the Viking 1 soldered in place?"

"I..." Cig's face clouded over in confusion.

"That's only useful if you knew *exactly* where you wanted to look." The Doctor smiled slightly at Cig. "But you've never been there."

Cig shifted uncomfortably. "You think my wife is messing with the equipment?"

"Oh, quite likely. And she quite likely knew I'd waste all my time on someone who doesn't like being corrected. Clever, very clever." The Doctor looked back down at the plans at the plans. "There was something else I said earlier. What was it?"

"You said a *lot* of things earlier."

"Yes, but this one was particularly brilliant. You should have taken it down." He chewed on his thumbnail. "What was it, what was it? Weight..."

“Wait for what?”

The Doctor waved a hand at Cig angrily. “Not 'wait,' *weight.* If...” He stopped. “As long as it weighs the same, no one will care.” He turned on his heel, pointing at Cig. “Tell me. If you were a time-traveller, where would you hide a sub-aural emitter?”

Cig's face contorted in confusion *“What!?”*

There was a scream from down the hall.

The Doctor turned to Cig. “Think about it, write it down, have it to me by the end of the day.” And he took off out of the room.

“I think you've seen about enough,” Akilah snarled through gritted teeth.

Clara stared in shock at the creature who'd just let out the scream. “What are you *doing* to them?”

“What do you care? Look at it!”

Clara was looking: four feet tall at best, splayed out on the long conference room table, a collection of twisted brick-red appendages that mimicked the form of a human enough for her to know they were clutching their head in pain.

“You're hurting them. How? *Why?* That's a living being!”

“Oh, it looks human enough to you now, but look!” Akilah prodded one of the creature's arms; it uncurled into three or four waving tentacles, flailing before wrapping them back into a vague arm shape. “It's trying to look more like us. Trying to get our sympathy. Well, it won't work on *me.”*

Akilah smacked the strange tuning fork against the table again. It made no sound that Clara could hear, but the creature shrieked, its twist of facial appendages constricting in agony. A flicker of pressure across Clara's temples made her inhale sharply – like the turbulence that had knocked the TARDIS about before, but lighter.

“Sub-aural waves,” she gasped.

“A very specific frequency. It took me forever, but I've finally

isolated it."

"Why, though? Why would you want to hurt them? What *are* they?"

"A Martian."

Clara and Akilah turned to see the Doctor leaning against the doorjamb. "Well, the *next* Martians," he went on. "A very small transplanted race called the Novirii. In 1975 they're single-celled organisms on the surface of Mars, but they'll become this in a few hundred million years or so. Not sure of the date, really. Maybe Ms. Abraham can narrow it down for us."

"Akilah..." Clara breathed. "You're from the future, too."

Akilah gave a watery smile. "Where did I slip up, Doctor?"

"Targeting the spectroscope." The Doctor's voice was surprisingly gentle. "Seemed odd that you were sure enough of what you were looking for that you fixed it in place. But it's not a spectroscope really, is it? It's a transmitter. And you'll send a destructive sub-aural wave through it from the comfort of home." He walked into the room, rounding the table to take a closer look at the creature. "I assume this was a one-way trip?"

Akilah nodded. "We can't really time-travel so much as do drop-offs. I brought that with me to run tests... to see if I could construct a wave that would do the job given today's technology."

Clara rushed to the Doctor's side, tugging on his sleeve. "Doctor, what is she talking about?"

"Genocide." The Doctor's voice was flat, cold.

"Yes," Akilah snapped back. *"Ours.* Unless we did something."

"You're not saying..." Clara shifted her gaze to Akilah. "You came all this way to destroy an entire species before it was even born."

Akilah smiled. "It's perfect, isn't it? A malfunctioning piece of equipment on a simple little Earth lander. Happens all the time. We looked back, found the one that landed closest to the first traces of its ancestors, and made a plan to zap them out of existence. Nothing

untoward or suspicious."

"You couldn't have picked a more perfect place," the Doctor muttered. "Marry a scientist you know will go into the program, and you're as good as in."

"No background checks," Clara recalled. "But why? What did they ever do to you?"

"Millennia ago, our homeworld was overrun by thousands of tiny pests. They seemed harmless, but those pests evolved into larger vermin, too numerous to wipe out... and those vermin evolved into *these."*

Clara narrowed her eyes. "You're from Mars? But I thought-"

Akilah shook her head impatiently, but the Doctor cut her off before she could explain. "The protozoan ancestors of the Novirii came from Mars. They'd never have survived there beyond single-celled organisms. But someone – a scouting crew, a tourist, a scientist – inadvertently brought them to you – to a world on which they could evolve." He looked over at Akilah. "Something like that?"

"Something like that," she agreed. "If they'd just stayed underground, things would have been fine. But they became *this.* **Started compromising our resources. Gained sentience. Started trying to walk among us."**

"So now they get to die," the Doctor said bitterly.

"It's them or us!"

"Is **it?"**

"Yes!" Akilah shouted. "Our planet is already overcrowded. We were there first. *We* **terraformed it. They're..." She glared at the Novirii on the table. "Hitchhikers."**

"Akilah..." Clara put a hand on her arm.

"It's pest control. Nothing more. Our world is dying because of them. This is the only way."

"You must know this isn't right."

Akilah locked eyes with Clara. "If you had my chance – if you had the ability to destroy something that could destroy *you* before it even existed – wouldn't you?"

The Doctor touched the Novirii's arm; it pulsed slightly, wrapping a tentacle around his thumb, then let go. "That's not a choice you're qualified to make, Akilah." His voice seemed sadder suddenly.

"Oh, and I suppose you are?"

The Doctor clenched his jaw. "No. That's my point."

"You can't stop me, Doctor." Akilah's eyes were shiny with tears threatening to fall. "I can never go home again. If I don't do what I came to do, it's all for nothing."

"Then find something," he growled. "Build more rockets. Take up martial arts. Something a bit less murder-y." He stalked off toward the construction room, putting his sunglasses on. Clara and Akilah dashed after him.

"Don't!" Akilah yelled. "I know you're going to do something, but don't. Please. Just... let us have this."

The Doctor stood opposite the lander – gleaming white with metallic accents, perfect and balanced. He clenched his fists.

"Doctor..."

He raised a hand... and flicked one of the antennas petulantly. "Fine. Come on, Clara. Leave her to her mission."

"Thank you," Akilah whispered.

Clara clenched her fists angrily, but the Doctor was already striding out the door toward the lab's car park.

"Just leave us here."

The intern shifted uncomfortably in her seat. "In the middle of nowhere?"

"Yes," the Doctor snapped, "in the middle of nowhere. Right next to that box. We'll call our ride from there."

The car was well gone before the driver had a chance to see the box in question disappear into thin air.

"You're cross," the Doctor observed as Clara scowled at the floor.

"Obviously."

"I just saved an entire species with a flick of the finger. You could look a *bit* more impressed." He descended the stairs and began rummaging around on the lower floor.

Clara turned, bending over the railing. "Y'what?"

"The antenna." There was a loud *clank.* "It won't be off enough to stop the signal entirely, but give it a rough landing and a couple decades and it'll shift enough that Akilah's signal will be harmless. Her test subject is beyond help, I'm afraid, but their kind can live on."

"Then that means the Novirii will take over her homeworld." Clara frowned. "There's no right answer, is there? Intervene and one group dies; don't, and another never exists."

The Doctor ascended the stairs again, holding a pair of pickaxes over his shoulder. "Don't know. I suppose that depends on if that student of yours is interested in an after-school project." He handed one of the pickaxes to Clara.

"You're talking about relocating an entire alien species?"

"A single-celled species in a place so small, Akilah could target it as closely as she did. All we have to do is get in before they send the boys up. Take them away and let them evolve somewhere where they won't get underfoot." The Doctor propped the second pickax across his shoulder. "So?"

Clara pondered quietly for a moment. "Can he take a bit of Mars rock home with him? Er, a non-verminy bit, obviously."

"No."

"Oh."

***"Yes,* he can take a bit of Mars rock home." The Doctor flipped a switch on the TARDIS console. "But he digs it up himself."**

Eyebrows and Fish

Matthew Bright

1.

Miss Fish needed a man, and Eyebrows would do.

‘Would you do me the pleasure?’ she said, holding out an elegant arm. It sounded like a question, but Miss Fish had an unerring ability to ask questions that somehow didn’t wait for answers.

Eyebrows looked her up and down as if she were an alien. He was standing next to a large blue police box—quite odd, really; Miss Fish hadn’t seen one of those since she last visited London. ‘You’re not one of those—what are they called?—ladies of the night, are you?’

Miss Fish smiled mildly. ‘You’re lucky I’ve been called much worse in my time. Now—*would* you please do me the pleasure?’ She jutted her elbow a bit more forcefully.

Eyebrows squinted at her, as if trying to decide.

‘What year is this?’

Trust her to pick a drunk. ‘1924,’ Miss Fish said. ‘Anything else you’d like to know?’

‘Why are all the women around here wearing tiny little hats? Have all the hats been shrunk? Is there some kind of national hat emergency?’

‘Fashion, I imagine.’

Eyebrows looked at the police box, and hopped from one foot to other. It was strange, Miss Fish thought, but it was almost as if he was asking permission. ‘Oh fine, then,’ Eyebrows said. ‘But I’m not dancing.’

Though her arm was looped into his, it was Miss Fish that look the lead—she guided him out of the alley into the square, where the Town Hall was lit up with lights and music. Gleaming motorcars pulling up

to dispense beautiful women and well-heeled men, where footmen waited to take the keys. 'The Gasfitter's Ball,' Miss Fish explained. 'It doesn't allow unaccompanied women, despite the fact that half of this affair was financed by me. Much as it galls me, I needed a man, you see.'

'And you don't have one?'

'I seem to have temporarily misplaced mine.'

Eyebrows looked at her sidelong. 'Seems unlikely.'

Miss Fish assumed that was a compliment, thought it was always hard to tell in a Scottish accent.

Inside, the party was well underway. A band on a raised dais were in full swing; a double bass player and trombonist faced each other as they marched the bassline down, and in front of them a thin blonde woman with coiffured hair and a scandalously short skirt was wailing into a microphone. Below them, the crowd danced energetically.

Eyebrows looked the room up and down. 'Groovy,' he said. 'Or is that the wrong decade?'

Miss Fish took his hand. 'Shall we dance?'

'Oh, no—no, but I said I—'

But as you already know, Miss Fish's questions were never really questions.

She had never seen someone dance quite like him—below the neck, his moves were perfect, textbook hand-to-hands, johnny drops, freezes, savoy kicks; above the neck, he looked like a cantankerous grandfather, eyes glowering from beneath *those* eyebrows.

'What was so important about getting in, anyway?' he asked her as they whirled past each other.

'I had an anonymous tip,' she shouted into his ear—then they were vanishing away again, her swinging in jockey around a well-built gentleman, him parading briefly in the midst of a circle of flappers, and then—'Said something I absolutely couldn't miss would be happening tonight.'

‘Anonymous tip,’ Eyebrows said. ‘So you’re a—’

‘Detective?’ Miss Fish kicked feet and spun. ‘Of course.’

‘Adventurous lady detective.’ Eyebrows kicked away and back. ‘Don’t know anyone name of Malone, do you?’

The song expired in a rousing finish. The crowd burst into applause.

Eyebrows leaned in to her. ‘If you’re a detective,’ he said, ‘how come you haven’t noticed that there’s a woman over there with a notepad, watching everything you do?’

Miss Fish looked over. ‘Oh, her? That’s Dotty, my assistant.’ Seeing her, the girl smiled and waved. She was stood beside a young man in police officer’s uniform.

‘Is that *her* man?’

‘Yes. Isn’t he handsome?’

Eyebrows craned his neck. ‘Not my type. Maybe in a few regenerations. Hold on—so *she* had a man. Why didn’t you just borrow hers?’

The music started up again, and Miss Fish began to pivot. ‘Where’s the fun in that?’ she said, as she spun around and—

3.

The music was gone, and everyone was screaming. And then, as if an enchantment had broken, everyone stopped screaming, not quite sure what all the fuss was about anyway.

There was seven seconds of glacial calm, and then the screams started all over again.

Miss Fish looked up, confused, from beneath the crush of Eyebrows’ body. He stared down at her, eyes bulging, and then the shuffled away, muttering apologies. ‘Sorry—not quite sure why—’

But Miss Fish wasn’t paying attention.

‘My god! Someone’s been murdered!’ Miss Fish darted through the crowd, and sure enough she was right. In the middle of the dance floor

lay the body of a woman. She wore long black habit, no makeup and sensible shoes, none of which was of interest to anyone because chiefly noticeable was the large hole in her chest.

Miss Fisher knelt beside her. 'How did this happen? Did anyone see —?'

There was a multitude of shaking heads.

'But surely you must have—'

One of the flappers, clutching her mouth, spoke up. 'I swear, Miss— it was like one moment she was there, and then the next…'

'Dotty.'

Miss Fish looked up. 'Excuse me?'

Eyebrows was fussing with his bottom lip. He called out louder, 'Dotty? Where are you?'

The girl shuffled forward; her policeman chaperone placed a hand on her shoulders protectively. 'Yes… sir?'

'What's the last thing it says in your notebook?'

'I wrote down 'Eyebrows dances'.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yes, I—wait. No. It says… 'bone thing.'

'Do you remember writing that?'

Dotty dropped the notebook, eyes wide. 'No. Sir.'

'Anything else? No? Good though, good. Keep writing down *everything***.'**

The crowd had frozen, as if unsure what precisely to do in this situation, but gradually the panic was setting in. 'Nobody move,' Eyebrows said.

Miss Fish looked up at him. That was a tone she recognised—the kind people didn't argue with. 'What's going on?'

‘Miss Fish—a moment ago we were over *there*.’ Eyebrows pointed to a spot near the bar. ‘And then we were over *here*. More significantly though, there is now a dead body in the middle of a crowded room which *nobody*—’ he gestured around for confirmation ‘—saw get there.’

‘Are you suggesting…’

‘Memory loss. All of us.’ His frown turned briefly into an excited grin, like a cloud blowing away from the moon. ‘Still—great mystery, ay? Like a locked room mystery but in total reverse.’

‘Memory loss. But… how?’

The moon clouded back over. ‘There is a creature I know of that could do it…’

Miss Fish swallowed. ‘A creature…?’

‘A creature, yes. A white creature, something you might almost describe as a *bone thing*. It sucks the life out of you and leaves you as a husk.’

‘As a… as a… I don’t follow.’

‘Think of it like the jam in a doughnut. Doughnut’s fine without it, but it’s the jam that makes it a proper doughnut. Otherwise you’re just… dry bread. Never mind, this is not my best metaphor.’ He gripped her by the shoulders. ‘There’s just one problem with this theory. Look around. What do you see?’

She turned in a full circle, trying to see everything in the cold light of rationality. ‘The doors,’ she said, ‘they’re hanging open. As if…’

‘…as if someone has smashed them open. Yes, but no. Nearer to home?’

She looked down at the body. ‘That hole—it’s as if something ripped out her heart.’

‘Exactly,’ he said. ‘And these bone things, they don’t do that, they —’

5.

Chaos. Again.

‘There seem to be an awful lot of people running and screaming again,’ Eyebrows said, picking himself up off the floor. ‘Miss Fish, did you happen to see…?’

‘Not a thing.’

‘No—me neither.’

The crowd, briefly panicked, had skidded to a halt, looking at each other in confusion.

‘No no,’ said Eyebrows. ‘I think you’re all probably right. You should all run.’ When no-one moved, he added, ‘Now.’

As everyone around them scrambled to vacate, Miss Fish looked at her watch. ‘Four minutes,’ she said. ‘Four minutes are gone.’

‘Yes,’ said Eyebrows. ‘I’d noticed.’ He suddenly winced, and clapped a hand to his face. ‘Did you *slap* me?’

There was an unmusical twang; on the stage, the band’s instruments clattered to the floor. The double bass was in smithereens, the trombone mangled. Miss Fish gaped. ‘What’s happened here?’

‘Something very big, and very noisy,’ Eyebrows said. He was pacing now. ‘You said you had an anonymous tip? So someone wanted you to see whatever *this* was. But what use is sending someone to see the one creature in the universe they’ll never remember.’

‘Why would anyone kill a nun?’

Eyebrows jiggled on his toes. ‘Well, I dunno—have you ever met one? Hold on—what’s a nun doing at a ball?’

Miss Fish shrugged. ‘They run a Temperance League. Perhaps she was here to protest?’

‘Or…’ Eyebrows spun. ‘Of course! A nun, an alien and a murderer all walk into a bar…’

‘Excuse me—’

‘It all makes sense! I think I know what’s happened!’ His face

darkened. ‘I think I know what’s happen*ing*… Miss Fish, have you asked yourself why you are holding a laser gun?’

‘Sir—’

‘Not now, I’m being impressive—’

‘Oi!’

Eyebrows blinked, first at Miss Fish, who he had assumed was interrupting him, and then up at Dotty, who was waving her notebook at him.

‘Sorry for being rude,’ she said, ‘but I think you need to hear this.’ She held the notebook to her face. ‘I wrote, ‘bone thing’, ‘murderer’, and… ‘tentacles’.’

Eyebrows spun.

‘Tentacles?’ he said. ‘Well that’s very bad.’

7.

The alleyway was empty, and Miss Fish felt sad.

She didn’t quite know why she felt sad, but it was a particular kind of melancholy that filled up her ribcage and her head, was almost spilling out beneath her eyelids.

She looked around—there was nothing to see here, nothing of note. Though come to think of it, how had she got here?

‘Miss?’

Miss Fish turned. At the entrance of the alley, Dotty was waving nervously. ‘Dotty,’ she said. ‘I’m so glad you’re alright.’

‘Of course, Miss Fish. And are you…?’

‘Oh, you know me, Dotty.’ She brushed herself down. ‘Do you have the car keys? I seem to have mislaid my purse.’ Miss Fish looked around one more time, and then shook herself, affected her usual debonair smile and sauntered towards Dotty, out onto the noisy square, and tried to ignore the feeling that what she was walking away from was anything but cold and empty.

2.

The Doctor never danced, but when he did, he did it right. And besides, there was something quite appealing about this Miss Fish. There was something familiar about her—short, dark bob, a bit feisty. It was a feeling that nagged, and though he couldn't quite put his finger on its source, the Doctor had learnt to follow those kind of nagging feelings.

Usually, they led to trouble, just like this.

Trouble like a tentacle monster bursting through the doors, pursued by a skeletal Silence and a nun with a laser gun.

The tentacle monster was a good eight feet tall, and so naturally there was a lot of screaming and running. It hurtled through the crowd, dodging laser blasts. The nun dashed in hot pursuit, screeching at it.

The Silence ghosted behind them, graceful amidst the chaos.

The band threw themselves off the stage. The Doctor threw himself at Miss Fish. The nun threw herself at the tentacle monster.

His head pressed awkwardly into Miss Fish's cleavage, the Doctor saw very little, but what he heard was more than enough. There was a fleshy ripping noise, and a wet screech cut off midway. And then a slithering, and the splintering of doors.

And, just in the Doctor's obscured eye-line, two pairs of impeccably shined shoes stepping unhurriedly past him, and out the door.

Then—

4.

The tentacle monster was back, cannoning into the room through the door it had left destroyed. It wriggled its many arms and opened its huge maw to roar. The whole room shook.

'Oh,' said the Doctor, spinning around, 'aren't you *adorable*?'

A tentacle struck him across the face, launching him clear across the room to collide with the band with an atonal clang. The double bass

splintered beneath him, the strings snapping in a perfect downward-descending one-two-three-four.

The tentacle monster advanced on him.

'A mournserpent! I haven't seen one of you lot in years—not since Hetheron 9. I don't suppose you know Zexwield Dampwick do you? He's about your height, bit greyer in the tentacles… no, no, you're right. Culturally insensitive of me, just because you're both mournserpents…'

The tentacle monster seemed to blur around the edges. It turned, distracted from its noisy little prey.

The Silence advanced across the room. Between them, the air blurred as the jam in the doughtnut was sucked out.

Tentacle monsters don't go down that easy though; it swung a thick arm, flattening the Silence against the wall.

'Hey!'

Laser bolts peppered the monster's green hide. It writhed in anger, wriggling around in a circle to find the one responsible for its pain.

Atop a table, Miss Fish stood with legs spread, laser gun pointed unwaveringly.

The tentacle monster roared in anger, and launched itself at her. Miss Fish did not flinch; it was not in her nature to do so, even when faced with such an extraordinary sight. But Miss Fish was not the creature's intention—instead it soared above her, crashing through the window, vanishing into the night.

The Silence stalked through the chaos behind it, unconcerned by the panicked crowd, and leapt through the hole in the glass.

6.

Of course, monsters always come back.

The mournserpent's roar was met with a louder noise—a piercing shriek that brought Miss Fish to her knees, hands clutched to her ears.

The Doctor held the sonic screwdriver against the microphone; the

noise ascended higher and higher, and before him, the mournserpent began to shrivel. It twisted and wriggled, sinking in on itself until it was no bigger than a dandelion.

The Doctor dropped the microphone and stowed the screwdriver away. 'Funny thing about mournserpents,' he said, 'their natural predator is the sonic shark. They've evolved to shrink up into nothing when they hear high pitched sounds. Keeps them safe.'

Miss Fish knelt down beside the hopping creature. She emptied out her purse and scooped it inside. 'What on earth is this thing…?'

'An alien?'

'Excuse me—a what?' She looked sidelong at her purse, which was shaking.

'An alien—no, don't write that down.' The Doctor knelt beside an overturned table and plucked the notebook from Dotty's quivering hands. 'I'm afraid I have to confiscate this.'

'Are you telling me that—?'

'Yes, I'm telling you that. Aliens, galaxies, whole new worlds, they're all out there. Thing is, you're not meant to find that out for a couple of decades yet. And the mournserpent wasn't too happy about that, I don't imagine.'

'I don't follow.'

'Well, I'm explaining. If you'd just listen…'

The Doctor jumped down from the dais. 'Mournserpents are amphibious. Can live on land, prefer oceans. And their planet has dried up—or it was last I visited. And good old earth—well, she's got plenty of water to spare. Just one little fly in the ointment—there's this proclamation, you see. If I'm honest, I'm not quite sure what the proclamation says, but it usually applies at times like these. Long story short, they can't come here until you lot find out about aliens.'

'And that's…'

'Not for a while. Unless they tip your hand.'

‘So…’

‘Yes. Yes. *Tip*. I thought I was being really obvious there.’

‘And so what about… that?’

Miss Fish pointed over the Doctor’s shoulder. He turned to look.

‘Now that… that’s the Silence. And you don’t need to know about those.’

The Silence approached.

The Doctor began to blur around the edges. ‘Now, none of that,’ he said. ‘You try going back and telling whoever’s running the Papal Mainframe these days that you tried to kill the Doctor at the wrong time, you see how that goes.’

The Doctor’s lines grew hard again.

‘I thought so,’ he said.

‘So this thing was trying to stop the… alien?’

‘The nun was—the Papal Mainframe. This is just her… pet. One I need to take back to the pound.’ The Doctor produced his sonic screwdriver again, and pointed it at the Silence. ‘Come on, laddie. That way. Good boy.’

He marched them through the detritus of the dance hall, out into the brisk night air, down the steps, to the alley way where the TARDIS waited. ‘In there,’ he said, thrusting the Silence through the door as if it were a naughty schoolboy sent home to its mother.

He turned to Miss Fish, startled to find her right behind him. She craned her neck to see inside. ‘My lord,’ she said, ‘it’s…’

‘Don’t,’ said the Doctor. ‘Unless…’

She pressed up close to him. ‘Unless?’

‘Unless you’d like to come with me? Galaxies, adventures, so on and so forth?’

Miss Fish smiled. ‘Are you asking me to come with you?’ It sounded

like another of those questions of hers.

The Doctor's eyebrows knitted together.

'There's something between us,' he said.

'I'll say…' Miss Fish reached up to cup his cheek.

'No,' said the Doctor, 'I mean *this.'* He reached behind her and pulled the laser gun from her waistband. 'I don't much care for guns, Miss Fish.'

'You didn't seem to mind when I was protecting you from a tentacle monster.'

'That as may be… perhaps I am best travelling alone. At least for now.'

She stepped backwards, biting her lip. 'Perhaps you are… I'm sorry, I don't know what to call you?'

'Oh, you'll only forget,' said the Doctor. 'Now, I must be going.'

She watched him step back into the TARDIS, and start pulling levers. He looked up at her from the panel as, with its plaintive *vwoorp vwoorp,* he began to dematerialise. Miss Fish stepped back, staring in astonishment as it faded slowly from view, until it was almost—

It was back. The Doctor hung out of the door.

'I thought of one thing,' he said.

'Yes?' Miss Fish smiled, expectantly. 'You want to take me with you after all?' This time it was a question, a real, true question, to which she only hoped for an answer.

'Ah,' said the Doctor. 'No.' He pointed. 'Your purse. I'll be needing that too.'

And then he was gone.

@allnewdoctorwho

Nick Wallace

1. Trapped on the Trans-Siberian express by the servants of Baba Yaga, Jospehine Grant makes a desperate call for help to an old friend.

2. The Doctor regrets a drunken night out with Plutarch in ancient Achea when it accidentally creates a new branch of neoplatonic philosophy.

3. Space diving through the gas spheres of the Biren system creates new life in your wake, and the Doctor discovers how extreme sports can get.

4. 1947, VE Day is finally at hand. 1967, JFK is shot dead. 1996, the Berlin Wall falls. History is running late and only one man knows why.

5. As the sun finally burns away the thousand-year fog on the planet Kelon, the Doctor discovers some things are not meant to be seen.

6. Voyage to the furthest reaches of existence is forbidden. But what lies beyond time itself that so frightens Gallifrey?

7. Night-time means certain death for anyone left in the open on the frozen plains of Shaan. So why has the TARDIS locked the Doctor out?

8. On her 100th birthday, a woman recounts the story of her life to a visitor; a silent passenger who has been there from the day of her birth.

9. As a population flees, the Doctor gives his orders: man the barricades and hold the line. The Sky Barons of Tran are on the move once more.

10. The rich occupy Kla's surface, with the poor exiled to a web of sky ghettos. With the Doctor's arrival, revolution is literally in the air.

11. On a distant world, the collective subconscious has form, and the Doctor gains a terrifying insight into the gods we create for ourselves.

12. The eve of Waterloo, and word reaches Wellington that

Napoleon's magician, known only as the Doctor, has foreseen the Emperor's triumph.

13. As an extinction event nears, the last days of the Silurians do not prove to be the elegant passing the Doctor was expecting.

The Doctor and the Witch

Rachel Redhead

Sometime in the 1970's or maybe the 80's

Time Lords are not the only lonely gods you know. Sure, they can walk in eternity, but eternity can be such a lonely place, without a good friend to keep you company.

The Doctor grinned, a toothsome grin. He took an almost child-like delight in the strangest of things. Sarah Jane Smith, ace reporter for Metropolitan magazine and current companion of the loneliest little boy in the universe, smiled back at her scarf-wrapped best friend. His smile always found its way onto her lips too. His delight was a joy to share.

'Where shall we go to now, Sarah?' The Doctor's rich larger-than-life voice was too loud for the oak-panelled walls of the TARDIS. 'The past or the future?'

'The future.' Sarah said without a moment's hesitation. 'I want to see the future. I want to see past the rebuilding of Earth, I want to see…I don't know, the 52nd century.'

'I've always been meaning to see then, myself.' The Doctor confessed as he eagerly pressed buttons, turned dials and activated switches. 'As I once said to Keir Hardy, just you wait and see what the future will bring.'

Sarah laughed. 'Oh Doctor, you terrible old name dropper. I never know when you're being serious.'

'Me, serious?' The Doctor laughed, pretending it was all a joke for a moment. 'I'm never serious when it matters the most. Anyway, you know, I think it may have been Nye Bevan I was speaking to.'

51, 204 CE

The TARDIS materialised with all the joy of an arthritic camel settling down to sleep at night. The bright blue impossible box was completely overlooked by the crowds of passing people, robots and law

enforcement drones.

The Doctor almost threw the doors open, like a magician presenting the grand reveal of his finest illusion. 'The future, Sarah. 51,204 to be exact, by your calendar anyway. By the local calendar it's 234/blue/8. Times change, but humans are still basically the same.' The Doctor raised his hat as a robot trundled past. 'Excuse me, madam.'

'Thank you.' Alice T. Robot said to the kind man in the nice scarf and went on her way to her mechanic's appointment.

'Robots?!' Sarah gleefully exclaimed.

'Well you really don't think that poor old K9 was the high point of robotic engineering, did you?' The Doctor pointed over in a random direction. 'There are more things in the future than are dreamed of in your philosophy, Sarah Jane Smith.'

The Witch (a ginger-haired woman who was getting bored with her steampunk phase) watched the Time Lord and his little pet with the aid of her crystal ball. 'So naïve, Doctor.'

'Are you sure we should be doing this?' Kass asked.

'Someone has to do it.' The Witch sighed. 'We merely drew the short straw. It's one of the young ones, too. Why couldn't it have been the shouty one or the scary one?'

'I like the scarf.' Kass smiled. 'It shouldn't work, but it does.'

'The same goes for the dilapidated banger he calls a time ship.' The Witch smiled. 'It doesn't even have an interactive avatar.'

'You only got ours working again last week.' Kass liked to point out the obvious to people; she felt it was a quality that endeared her to others. She was very wrong - and that was what was really endearing.

'Avril just needed a holiday,' the Witch explained. 'She was always tidying up after you and Becky.'

'Are we seriously having a domestic now?' Kass asked. 'Let's go back to the scarf man and whatshername.'

'Sarah Jane Smith.' The Witch replied. 'Never forget that name,

she's important.'

'Who to?' Kass asked.

'To everyone,' the Witch replied. 'Which is why we received kill orders. From them.' The Witch hated working for them; they weren't even that good at their job. Their own agents were incompetent morons who couldn't even shoot straight. She'd said as much at the time.

'Why are we working for them again?' Kass asked.

'Because I owe them three favours.' The Witch replied. 'They taught me things, now I have to pay off my…let's call it a student loan.'

The Doctor found, to his delight, a man with a gun. 'Hello,' he said managing to get at least seventeen tones into just the one word.

'Why's he got a gun pointed at us?' Sarah asked the Doctor.

'I was wondering the same thing myself.' The Doctor looked curiously at the man. 'Why have you got a gun pointed at us?'

'Orders, innit,' the man with the gun replied. 'Find the loony with the scarf and rescue 'im.'

'There's no 'loonies' here,' the Doctor tried to explain loudly. 'My friend Sarah and I just arrived here. I can assure you that we're both in reasonably good cheer. What do you think, Sarah? Are we in good cheer? Well, I think we are anyway.'

'Why don't you lower the gun and talk?' Sarah suggested to the man with the gun.

'I have the gun, so I get to talk anyway.' The man with the gun didn't realise that guns stopped you from thinking, there weren't a weapon to make you powerful, they were a symptom of being selfish. Just wanting to get your own way and making sure no-one else got in the way of your desires.

Guns equalled insanity in the mind of the Doctor, which is why he never had a gun and why he talked all the time. 'By all means, talk away.' He gave the man with the gun a disarming smile.

‘What do you want?’ Sarah asked the gun man.

‘Does it matter?’ the Witch interrupted the boring conversation and used purple-tinged magic to carve the man out of existence. ‘He was never born now.’

‘What did you do?’ the Doctor was aghast at the orange-haired woman murderer. ‘You just killed someone.’

‘No I didn’t.’ The Witch replied. ‘To kill someone they have to be alive. He was never born, so he didn’t die.’

‘That’s true.’ Kass said in agreement.

‘It’s the same thing.’ Sarah said to the ginger killer and her sidekick. ‘You just killed that man.’

‘You lot normally get me to do your dirty work.’ The Doctor glared at the intruder. ‘You like to keep your lily-white hands clean.’

‘Oh, *they* sent me,’ the Witch tried to explain, a little. ‘But I’m not one of them.’

‘Why are you doing their dirty work then?’ Sarah asked the mysterious woman. ‘I assume we’re all referring to the Time Lords.’

‘I owe them,’ the Witch replied. ‘And he doesn’t take their calls anymore. Yet they want him alive. A renegade wanderer out here in time and space. Now why do you suppose that is?’

‘The Doctor is always one step ahead of them.’ Sarah replied. ‘He’s outsmarted them before. The Brigadier told me how the Doctor helped the Time Lords to defeat Omega.’

‘That’s right.’ The Doctor beamed. ‘It was up to me, me and me. Though of course me was barely there and me interfered as much as helped.’

‘We should be leaving now.’ Kass said to the Witch. ‘We’ve done what we were sent to do.’

‘There’s still more to do,’ the Witch replied.

‘I think you’ve both done quite enough already,’ Sarah retorted, still looking at the spot so recently vacated by the nameless man with

the gun.

‘The Master sent three assassins after you,’ the Witch explained. ‘One’s been taken out of the equation, that leaves two more in play.’

The Doctor felt the weight of the centuries heavy on his conscience. ‘Perhaps it’s better that we just left if the Master’s involved. Killing people to get my attention has always been his calling card.’

‘We defeated him in Cairo and on Soy,’ Sarah replied defiantly. ‘You can defeat him again.’

‘It takes a keen mind to defeat a Time Lord,’ the Doctor pronounced solemnly. ‘If the Master is here then we’ve undoubtedly already walked into his trap.’

‘Three assassins,’ the Witch interjected. ‘One for each of the previous lives you defeated him in. Your first self was his best friend, so no assassin for that version of you.’

‘People change.’ The Doctor sighed. Cosmic angst was no joke, not to someone in their fifth century of life. ‘The Master was once the best of us, kind, wise, and an intellect to see new ways to help others. He was always delicate though, even as a child. Though he could run as fast as the rest of us.’

‘Let’s run away now.’ Sarah said to her friend, re-considering. ‘Let’s get out of here, spoil the Master’s trap. Why would he kill anyone else if you’re not here anymore?’

‘That sounds smart.’ Kass said in agreement. ‘If they go, then we won’t have two more murderers to wipe out of existence. All their crimes, undone. All the lives they stole returned.’

‘It doesn’t work that way,’ the Doctor said to the two women. ‘Killing is still killing, no matter how surgical you make it seem. The damage it does to you is still there.’

‘I’m a big girl,’ the Witch replied. ‘Kill me and I just come back with a new face and a bigger chip on my shoulder.’

‘I thought you said you’re not a Time Lord,’ Sarah said.

‘I’m not,’ the Witch replied. ‘I’m from another reality, another

level of existence. There magic is used to control time, not your vague engines of locomotion. You treat time like a solid barrier to punch through. You damage it each time you travel through it. The tracks of your tears are the scars you inflict upon the fabric of reality. Damage the delicate web of reality enough times and you *will* shatter it.'

'What do you do then?' The Doctor asked. 'You with your magic and your penchant for casual murder?'

'The fabric of existence is just that, a fabric. A cloth of reality, woven long ago, by Rassilon and Omega in this version of reality. Like any fabric, if you look at it the right way it's just a lot of holes.'

'Like something that sea devil wore.' Kass said, using a metaphor.

'Yes.' The Doctor mused. 'Well this is very interesting. However, that doesn't explain why the Time Lords want you to keep me alive.'

'Now what was that word she used?' The Witch remembered an angry blonde woman who once punched her. 'Oh, never mind now. You're important, to people. They know that, they fear what you may one day become. Heroes make the worst villains. They fear you'll destroy all they desire.'

'What rubbish,' the Doctor scoffed. 'Come on Sarah, we've heard quite enough.'

The Witch acted quicker than the gap between tick and tock. She took the bullet meant for the Doctor in the shoulder. 'Damn it!'

'Hannah!' Kass accidentally used the Witch's real name, a major faux pas. 'Is it serious?'

'He caught me by surprise.' The Witch snarled. 'I had only a moment to act.' She held the second assassin in a blue magical bubble. 'If I erase him then he will never have shot me.'

'Time doesn't work that way,' the Doctor chided. 'You can't have a consequence without an action. The action is he shot you, the consequence is you erased him. If you erase him then he never shot you, so you never erased him.'

'I was always going to erase him.' The Witch smiled and did so. 'Doesn't matter if I was shot or not. I took the bullet to stop you dying.

It's got perstic acid on it. I'm immune to it, but you're not.'

'The bullet hole's gone.' Kass was amazed. 'You were right. The action was undone.'

'But you created a paradox.' The Doctor sighed. 'You broke the laws of physics.'

'The laws of physics,' the Witch scoffed. 'I used magic to undo him. Magic is outside the laws of physics. You should know that, your people wrote the damn things. The people who trained me are from a whole different place. Here I'm one of the few people who can wield magic, where I'm from there are hundreds, though most of them just watch the rest of the universe from their lofty perches.'

'So you're more of a Magic Lord?' Sarah asked, trying to understand what was being discussed.

'Magic Lady please,' the Witch smiled. 'Actually I call myself a Twister, because I see the possible time streams in flux, twisting around me, all of them wanting to become the future. I just select the one I want to be the future.'

'I'm not sure I understand,' Sarah said to the others.

'Welcome to my life,' Kass said to Sarah. 'I have to listen to that sort of thing every week. Becky understands though, so that's something.'

'My protégé.' The Witch smiled. 'I left her behind, while I came here to answer the summons of, oh what was his name? Lord President, chap with the sash and the robes. Never mind, names aren't important, if we don't try and live up to them. Come on, physician, heal yourself.'

'I'm quite sure I don't know what you mean,' the Doctor lied. 'Come on Sarah, let's go.' He was very wary of this Hannah woman, or the Witch, whatever she called herself. What did she mean with that name? Was she a wise woman? Was she a crone of ill repute? She was a killer and yet she was keeping him alive. She was an annoying mystery, one he both wanted to solve and run away from at the same time.

‘Hi Becky,’ Kass said to her friend. ‘What are you doing here?’

‘Must kill him.’ Becky was crying because she wasn’t in control of herself. ‘For my…Master.’

The Witch swore, and Sarah slapped her on reflex. ‘Ow!’ She grabbed hold of Becky and bound her with blue magic to restrain her. ‘Of course, it makes sense.’

‘What makes sense?’ Sarah asked.

‘Becky was the ultimate assassin, once.’ Kass explained. ‘Though she reformed and recanted her old ways and swore to become a power for good in the universe. Our universe.’

‘I found her.’ The Master interrupted the tearful reunion. ‘A lonely child looking for her place in the grand scheme of things. With such an impressive skill set too. I knew they had plans to interfere in my plans, so I changed my plans to ruin their plans. It’s such a delicious irony, don’t you think?’

Kass looked at the sinister man with the cold eyes of a monster and the beard of a pantomime baddy. ‘Good will always defeat evil.’

‘I agree,’ the Doctor said to Kass.

‘Do you really think so?’ the Master asked the interfering woman. ‘Let us see.’ He shot Kass with his laser pistol. ‘Perhaps not. It seems the right way to say hello. I do so hate to ruin a grand reunion, but it seems a few deaths are necessary to get your attention Doctor. I’m disappointed in you I must say. Once you had an entire army at your side, now you have…children.’ He looked at the Witch. ‘You show some promise at least my dear, but I could never countenance a rival. The Doctor is mine alone to torment.’

‘I was obliged to save him from three assassins,’ the Witch replied. ‘I’ve done so. My contract is fulfilled. If you kill him yourself then that’s your business, nothing to do with me.’

‘A most enlightened and unexpected philosophy,’ the Master said to the meddling Witch. ‘Very well, take your apprentice and your bodyguard with you.’

‘Of course.’ The Witch knew the Master was never one to be

trusted, yet he did have a peculiar internal logic to his actions. He'd stop an execution to burn an ant with a magnifying glass. 'They're all yours.'

'You can't leave us now!' Sarah exclaimed.

'Let them go, Sarah.' The Doctor shook his head sadly. 'The Master has won, after all the time's he's tried to defeat me, he's finally managed it.'

'You think so?' The Witch quickly showed the Doctor how to manipulate the fabric of magic. 'Blue is for shields and prisons.'

The Doctor saw beyond the nature of the universe to the deeper mysteries beneath the surface, everyday things. He saw the different strands of magic that underpinned the fabric of reality and if he turned his head a certain way then the tight weave became a loose net that was more holes than material. He pulled at a strand of blue magic, it flowed over his hand, like a snake. He hurled the blue magic at the Master and it formed a shell around his best enemy. 'Well, it worked,' he boomed toothfully. 'Not all Time Lords turned their back on magic. My old teacher once taught me the beauty of the smallest flower. He knew more about magic than anyone.' He looked at the Master. 'Back to UNIT for you.'

'Actually they're on their way here for him.' The Witch said. 'Kass only had a minor injury.'

'I saw her get shot dead moments ago.' Sarah exclaimed.

'I was shot.' Kass agreed. 'But robots don't have vital components where he shot me. For once I'm glad I'm not a human being.'

'You did great.' Becky said to the Doctor. 'Sorry about being taken over and being used as his puppet. I'm glad you survived. Plus you used magic, how cool was that? I remember the first time I was able to touch one of the magical energies. Green, as it happened. It rained for a week wherever I went, until I was able to work out what I'd done and put it right again.'

'Some things are best left a mystery,' the Doctor smiled. 'The sonic screwdriver is quite enough for me. Magic is all very well but you can't use it to take short cuts to get what you want. Sometimes you have to

lose a battle to win a war.' The Doctor pointed to the empty area where the Master no longer was. 'I have a feeling the future will catch up with him soon enough.'

'Time will tell.' The Witch smiled. 'It always does.'

'You speak like you know more about the Doctor than you're letting on,' Sarah said to the Witch. 'Little digs and references. I'm a journalist, I know these things.'

'I know.' The Witch nodded. 'One day I promise that I'll tell you everything, just not this day.'

'We'd better get back to Merlin,' Becky said quietly to her friends. 'I think we've outstayed our welcome here.'

'I can't hold you to that promise, can I?' Sarah mused over Hannah's words. 'If you're from another universe like you claim then I'll probably never see you again.'

2016CE

The doorbell rang. 'Luke, Sky?' Sarah Jane called out. 'Can't either one of you answer the door?' She opened the door to see a face from the past. 'It's you!' She said to the ginger woman known at the Witch. 'You don't look a day older.'

'It's been twenty years for me,' Hannah mused. 'I had a lot to do. Then I found myself back here and I knew I owed you answers. 13 Bannerman Road, this is a rather nice home you have.'

'It's a bit late now to come here, it's been…more than twenty years for me.' Sarah Jane replied. 'All that was so long ago.'

'Nonsense,' Hannah replied. 'It's just Hannah now, by the way. That's what friends call me. Only my enemies call me the Witch. It's quite ironic really, I'm supposed to be this great and powerful woman using wisdom to enlighten and protect, but all I do is kill and bring terror. Maybe it's time to stop being me?'

'If you're looking for absolution, then you've come to the wrong place. I have two children to look after, four if you count Clyde and Rani.'

‘Actually I just came to honour a promise,’ Hannah said, refusing to admit that she was a little lonely these days. ‘I told you I’d give you answers, well now’s the time.’ She paused for a moment. ‘Where I’m from, there are people like me. Usually they’re a lot better at doing what I do than me. I care about lives. I try not to let others get caught up in wars that shouldn’t involve them. Magic should be a privilege, used to help others, not be the tool of monsters who don’t care if innocents get in their way.’

‘Why not do something about it then?’ Sarah Jane asked.

‘I am, myself and a few others are fighting back. Trying to set a better example. My reality might be burning right now. It could even be ashes. If I’m the last, then I need to know that the ideals of my people live on. If I teach you to use magic, to help people, then you can save more people and you’ll be able to retain your cover story with ease. Honestly, how have you managed to avoid detection so far? With transportation magic you could turn your car invisible and fly to where you need to go. You can open up portals away from this world and send invaders back home through them. Magic is dangerous, of course, and the temptation to abuse such powers is great, but you’re the only one on your world brave enough to know when not to use them. Even the Doctor knew that, the man who tries to make people better. He’s still out there, perhaps he still needs you, but he’s so far away now, and you have your children to look after, to keep safe. I can teach you how to use magic, but I can’t teach you how to use it wisely. That you must learn for yourself. You’re the only person on this world I can entrust the secrets of magic to. Please use them to help others, and to see your friend. He’s on his own right now, he needs someone to be with him. I have to go back to my people, eventually, to see if they’re still there. There are so many wonderful things on your world, if anyone can preserve them it’s you, Sarah Jane Smith.’

Hannah started to pull the various different strands of magic into a context Sarah could understand them. ‘Red magic is for healing, it can be used to mend broken bones, heal cuts and bruises, reverse ageing, and much more besides. Focus, feel it, it helps you get better…’

What the Who?

Philip Ardagh

‘What the --?’

‘Yup. Bigger on the inside than on the outside. I get that a lot.’

‘No. It’s not that.’

‘NOT that? Then you don’t like what I’ve done with the place?’

‘It’s the fact that it’s real. That… That it’s REAL.’

‘So real you said it twice.’

‘I always thought it was just a TV show.’

‘Not *just* a TV show. Where have you been the last fifty-or-so-Earth-years? Remember the merchandising. The magazines. The –’

‘But you… The Tardis… All real.’

‘Yup. I think now would be an appropriate moment for me to leap about, pull a few levers, flick a few switches and say, ‘Change the record,’ in an exaggerated Glaswegian accent, *eeeee*longating the vowels.’

‘WOW!’

‘Yes, well, ‘WOW!’ might be an alternative to ‘all real’, though I was hoping for something a little more erudite.’

‘Isn’t that a kind of glue?’

‘You’re thinking of Araldite, which I couldn’t say if this were on the Beeb.’

‘A planet?’

‘The Beeb. The BBC. Get with the programme.’

‘I’m sorry. It’s a lot to take in. Does this… Does this mean that all the aliens --?’

‘Careful. You’re just as much an alien to the billions of other lifeforms on billions of other planets. A gas cloud on Flatulon 4 would sooner eject itself through an airlock than share a lift with the likes of you.’

‘There’s a gassy planet called Flatulon 4?’

‘Well… I may have made that part up. I’ve visited rather too many planets to remember them all.’

‘Oh my God!’

‘Surely you mean, OMD? No. Wait. That’s Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Dark –’

‘Some interplanetary invasion force?’

‘No, A Liverpudlian electronic music group formed in the ’70s. Lost credibility with their *Dazzle Ships* **album of 1983. I meant OMG. Oh. My. God. Don’t you hip young humans use acronyms nowadays?’**

‘We certainly don’t use ‘hip’. But…if you and the Tardis are real, does that mean that the Daleks are real too?’

‘Give the boy a banana. Or should that be a cigar? Might I recommend the healthy option?’

‘THE DALEKS ARE REAL?’

‘Yes. Of course. It would be a waste of my not inconsiderable talent to go through the Universe – capital ‘U’ because there’s only one of them – chasing non-existent, mad-up, make-believe baddies, now, wouldn’t it?’

‘Then who’s Terry Nation?’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘I always thought the Daleks were make-believe TV-show villains created by Terry Nation. He gets a credit at the end of the show.’

‘It’s a joke. All the names are jokes. Puns. Plays-on-words. Do you know what terra firma is?’

‘Latin for ‘firm ground’. Sailors who’ve been at sea for a good while

are supposed to feel good about setting foot on terra firma again.'

'Have TWO bananas.'

'I'm sorry?'

'It's a *Jungle Book* **reference. The Disney film, not the book. And the first film. The cartoon version, though they re-used the dialogue from that in the eighth.'**

'Disney made - will make - *eight* **versions of The Jungle Book?'**

'More. They know when they're onto a good thing… But we digress. Let me do a dramatic twirly spin on the spot, for no discernible reason other than to lift my coat-tails revealing a natty red lining. Terra means ground or earth. So Terry Nation means: Earth Nation.'

'Earth Nation?'

'The Human Race.'

'WOW! But why say that the Human Race created the Daleks?'

'You can't have enemies if you don't exist in the first place.'

'But –'

'Then there are the initials.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'John Nathan Turner: J.N.T. Just Not True. He didn't really exist.'

'What about Russell T Davies?'

'What about Russell T Davies?'

'What do his initials represent?'

'The T doesn't stand for anything. His real name is Stephen Russell Davies.'

'He's real then?'

'Larger than life, though small for a Gluggorian.'

'Gluggorian?'

‘An amiable lifeform with lots of TV experience.’

‘This… This is a lot to take in.’

‘I’m sure one of my earlier regenerations would offer you a jellybaby about now, but I’m afraid all I have in my pocket is this –’

‘Your sonic screwdriver!’

‘Calm down, dear. Yes. And one of the few things it can’t do is rustle—’

‘--T Davies?’

‘No, not Russell T. Davies. I was going to say it can’t rustle up a snack.’

‘What’s that?’

‘The beep-beep-beeping?’

‘Yes.’

‘I was wondering that too. I thought I might be imagining things: an auditory hallucination. Comes with the territory. But as you can hear it too, I suspect it might be an interplanetary distress signal.’

‘Shouldn’t you check it out? Respond, or something?’

‘Of course, it could just be the microwave.’

‘You have a microwave aboard the Tardis?’

‘Just my little joke… You have a decision to make, my friend.’

‘What’s that?’

‘If it *is* a distress signal and if I think I can help…’

‘Yes?’

‘Are you going to get the hell out of my Tardis, or are you going to come along with me for the ride?’

Such stuff that dreams are made of.

The Palace

Philip Marsh

There was a knocking on the somewhat grimy glass.

'Wakey-wakey.'

The elderly man behind the box office desk jolted, as though woken from slumber.

'Come on mate, give us a wave.'

On the other side of the glass partition was a face. Or rather a huge smile, hanging between two ears that could easily hold its weight. He had the appearance of someone who had not been long demobbed from war duty, with a severe short back-and-sides and the manner of someone determined to experience all the comforts of home – including, of course, a visit to the local cinema.

'Oh, I do beg your pardon sir,' he replied. 'I am afraid I was somewhat distracted for a moment. Welcome to The Palace. How can I help you?'

'I'd like to see the film, please.'

'Er…which film in particular would you like to see, sir?'

'Well, what are the options? And please, don't call me 'sir'.'

'As you wish, sir. Well, this week we have a themed selection based on parts of the body. So, we have *The Face Of Evil*, **which is…' he looked down at the information sheet on the desk in front of him and adjusted his spectacles, 'a noir thriller about a senior Nazi official's attempt to hide himself after the end of World War 2.'**

'Hmm. Sounds a bit heavy, that. What else have you got?'

'Well sir, there's *The Hand Of Evil* **– the story of a scientist who carries out the world's first hand transplant, only to find the hand he has been sold on the black market belonged to a killer called The Detroit Strangler, who then takes over his body and forces him to**

continue his reign of terror.'

'I do like a schlocky horror occasionally. It's a guilty pleasure.'

'In that case sir, may I recommend our third choice – *The Mind Robber***. A slightly inaccurate title as it is of course the brain that is stolen, rather than the mind, but that aside it has been rather popular as a midnight screening down the years. Or if sir would like something a little more exotic, there is our Chinese import –** *The Talons Of…***'**

'I think *The Mind Robber* **sounds right up my street, thanks very much. Do I have to come back at midnight for that one then?'**

'Oh no sir. Why, you're just in time.'

'Fantastic. And how much is a ticket?'

'Well, given the…er…*distracted* **manner in which I responded to you when you arrived sir, I would like to offer you free entry. Although if you could refrain from mentioning it to my manager, or the fact that I was…well…'**

'Distracted?'

'The very word, sir. If you could refrain from informing the manager of that fact, I would consider it a great favour.'

'Consider it done. My lips are sealed. You won't hear a peep out of me.'

'Thank you sir. Now, the film is due to begin any moment. Please allow me to escort you to the correct screen.'

He stood slowly, shuffled to the door, opened it fully and then, once through, completed a 180-degree turn, pulled it closed behind him and locked it.

'This is most kind…er…'

'Albert, sir.'

'Nice to meet you, Albert. I'm the Doctor.'

'Oh, how fortunate.'

For the first time since the Doctor had appeared in front of Albert, his smile shrunk down to a frown, rapidly, like spinach thrown into boiling water. 'Is it?'

'Why yes, sir,' Albert replied with a smile of his own. 'It is always fortunate to have a doctor in the house.'

'Not always,' muttered the Doctor under his breath, but Albert had already turned away from him.

'Now sir, you will be wanting screen 3. It's on the other side of the building, but if we are quick you won't miss a thing.' He then proceeded to walk, slowly, away from the booth.

'Actually,' said the customer, 'before we go. Don't suppose you've got a mirror handy do yer? Only I've just got a new face and I've no idea what I look like. Not that I'm vain you understand, but imagine you met someone at a party, got drunk, did the snogging and exchanging numbers thing, and then when you ring them the next day they can't remember your name and you can't describe yourself. All kinds of potential for embarrassment there. They might think they're getting Lord Byron and end up with the Elephant Man. So…yeah. A mirror. I've definitely got one somewhere but can I remember where I left it? Can I 'eckerslike. You see, this face-change thing is more of an everything-changing thing really. Definitely an improvement but it does scramble the old grey matter up something chronic.'

'I am afraid we have no mirrors in this establishment, sir.'

'What, none at all? What about in the toilets? Surely there's one above the sink?'

'Normally, yes. However I am afraid that the toilets are currently out of order. No-one allowed in.'

'Oh, that's a shame. Plus it means I'd better not buy a drink from the shop on the way in.'

'I am afraid we do not have a shop, sir.'

'What? No shop? How am I supposed to get me popcorn?'

'We have an usher who sells popcorn from a tray in the theatre…'

‘Brilliant.’

‘…who is unfortunately unwell at the moment and not in work, and even more unfortunately has taken the key to the snacks cupboard home with them.’

‘Oh. That *is* unfortunate. Had any complaints? What about the lighting in this place? I mean, I love a gloomy corridor, me, but isn’t it supposed to only get dark once you’re actually in your seat? And the fixtures and fittings, the paint-jobs and the carpets…no offence but the whole place could do with a bit of a spruce-up, I can see that even with the lights down.’

Albert looked around, as though he had not really noticed the surroundings before. The Palace was, he had to admit, not in the best of condition. The paintwork had started to crack on one wall – although he was sure it hadn’t been like that earlier. Come to think of it, the wall itself seemed *wrong* somehow. Wasn’t it flat last time he had looked at it? Now it seemed to be curved in a way that made Albert quite dizzy to look at. And it was also true that the lights were lower than he would have expected – the chandelier was not lit at all, and neither were any of the smaller lights. He wondered how he had been able to read the synopses for the films they were screening to the Doctor, as the light in the box office wasn’t on either.

‘I believe, sir, that we are due a major refurbishment very soon, which will, I am sure, address all of your concerns. As for complaints, I can honestly say, sir, that once our customers have sat through one of our screenings they are of no mind to complain.’

‘Blummin’ eck Albert, how big is this place?’ asked the Doctor as they walked up yet another flight of thread-bare carpeted stairs. ‘We should be on the other side of the street by now. Also, generally if you go up a set of stairs to get someplace, you don’t then end up walking back down another set before you get there – especially multiple times.’

The ache in Albert’s legs concurred with the Doctor’s sentiments. ‘The design is somewhat eccentric, sir. It would appear that the architect was no fan of Archimedes.’

‘Archimedes?’ asked the Doctor, looking at him askance.

‘Why, yes sir. A straight line being the shortest distance between two points. Except of course for non-Euclidean geometry, when it might not be.’

The Doctor looked thoughtful. ‘You’re a very educated man Albert.’

‘Not really, sir. I just pick the odd thing up here and there. Mind you, you do have a point. It does seem to be taking longer to reach the screening room than usual. I dare say it is down to my legs – I am not as mobile as once I was. Do you mind if we take a brief pause?’

‘Of course not. Take as long as you like.’

‘Thank you sir.’ Albert slowly lowered himself and sat on the top step of the staircase. When he looked up, the Doctor was already distracted by something else.

‘Oh look – you still have the original gas fittings,’ he said, reaching up to touch one of the wall-mounted lamps. ‘Better keep those when you do the place up, you never know when they might come in handy. How long have you worked here Albert?’

‘Longer than I care to recall, sir. In fact, I cannot remember a time when I did not work here.’

The Doctor sat on the step, next to Albert.

‘And what do you like to do on your days off?’

‘Days off, sir? Why, I don’t have days off.’

‘Hmm. Depending on the year that’s probably illegal. You should go on strike.’

‘In truth, sir, my habits are simple and quiet. If I had a day off I dare say I lack the imagination to think of anything of interest to do with it.’

‘Well, what about during the evening?

‘In the evening I collect up the day’s takings, make full record of them in the book, and then lock the money in the safe. Then I do a check of every room in the cinema to make sure that there is no-one

still inside the building. You can not be too careful. Children often attempt to hide in the building, and use it as a playground.'

'And then?'

'I lock the front door.'

'And then?'

'I unlock it, and prepare for the new day's customers.'

'But what about when you go home?'

'Home, sir?'

'Yes. Home. Your castle. Your digs. Where you live.'

'Well…I live quietly, I suppose. And then I come back to work the next day.'

This answer appeared to frustrate the Doctor, for reasons Albert could not understand. 'Ok, let's try something else. What's your favourite food?'

'Ah, now that is somewhat embarrassing, but I must admit that I have recently developed quite a taste for popcorn. When it is available, of course.'

'How did you do at school? Were you a good student?'

'Oh, that was a very long time ago, sir. I don't rightly remember those days too clearly. But I suppose I can't have been, or else I wouldn't have spent my life working at a picture house, would I?'

'And can you remember applying for this job? What made you select this one to apply for above the others available?'

'Not really, sir. I suppose it looked like a pleasant job to do.'

'And how did you find out about it? Was there a sign outside the cinema? An advert in the paper?'

'Something like that, I shouldn't wonder.'

The Doctor pursed his lips, thoughtfully, before recommencing his barrage of questions. 'And this manager of yours – nice fella, is he? I

mean, I assume this place hasn't had a female manager yet?'

'Oh good gracious, no. In fact, there's only been one manager since I started here.'

'What's his name?'

'Well, he's…I mean, he's called…the Manager.'

'Ok, well I can hardly criticise him for that one. A hands-on type, is he?'

'Oh yes.'

'Likes to muck in, get his hands dirty?'

'Oh yes.'

'Great. So what does he look like?'

'Er…Well…I'm not quite sure how you would describe him.'

'Let's start with the basics. Tall or short?'

'That surely depends on your definitions of the terms. You, after all, are somewhat taller than me and what I consider tall may be what you consider merely medium height.'

'But what would *you* **consider him to be? By** *your* **standards.'**

'I'd say…I'd say…average. Yes, I'd say average height.'

'Ok. Hair colour?'

'Average.'

'Average?'

'Yes. Not too dark, not too light. You know.'

'Right. Is there anything specific you can tell me about him?'

'Oh, there is one thing, now I come to think of it. We don't have a projectionist. The Manager handles that.'

'On all three screens?'

‘Yes.’

‘At the same time?’

‘He is an excellent multi-tasker.’

Finally they arrived at the door marked ‘Screen 3’. It was very quiet, and there had been no other customers to be seen or heard during the over-long journey.

‘Here we are sir. Just in time by the sounds of it – I can’t even hear the trailers.’

‘Thank you Albert,’ said the Doctor. ‘You’ve been extremely helpful.’

‘It’s been my pleasure sir. And, if I may say so, I’ve greatly enjoyed our conversation today.’

‘Me too Albert, me too. Right, I shan’t keep you from your duties any further.’

‘Thank you, sir. And I hope you enjoy the film.’ And with that he turned and walked slowly away.

The Doctor watched him go. ‘Right,’ he said to himself. ‘Time for my close-up.’ And he stepped through the door.

As Albert shuffled back towards the box office, he found himself in an strange state of mind. Usually he was not one for introspection, but the Doctor’s questions had forced a reflective mood onto him and he found that there was something wrong, something nagging at the back of his mind but he couldn’t for the life of him work out what it was. He had answered the Doctor’s questions honestly, but he found the haziness of his memory when he actually tried to interrogate it somewhat concerning. After pondering this for a few moments, he dismissed the concerns.

‘Just old age getting to me,’ he thought. ‘Inevitable. Happens to us all I suppose.’

But just as he gave up on his attempt to remember further, he was startled by a sudden recall. Earlier, when the Doctor had woken him from his sleep, he had interrupted a dream, and fragments of that

dream now floated back up to the surface of his memory. Yes, he remembered now. In the dream, he didn't work in a picture house. No, he was some kind of teacher. But what did he teach? Mathematics! Yes, that was it. Him, teaching maths! What preposterous ideas the sleeping mind creates. Almost certainly a reflection of the pride he took with the accuracy of his counting up of the takings each evening, he thought.

There had been other elements to the dream. Something about a family life he chose not to think about too hard – as a confirmed bachelor of advanced years he was beyond all of that now. And then it had become melodramatic as dreams do – something about a car crash. And then the dream came back closer to reality, with him spending his evenings in the picture house, in the darkness of the screening rooms with the ghosts of famous actors pinned against the big screen and forced to re-enact their stories again for him and the desultory number of patrons that drifted into The Palace. The same films over and again, with Albert finding comfort in the reliability of the repetition. But even in the dream there was that nagging feeling of missing something.

Albert shook his head to clear it of such time-consuming reflections. He had to get back to the box office and wait for customers. After all, what else was there for him to do?

Screen 3 turned out to be almost disappointingly ordinary. Wooden seats in rows leading up to the top of the room where the projector's booth sat in the middle. The most note-worthy thing about it was that it was completely empty. 'A big hit as the midnight show,' the Doctor commented scornfully. 'It obviously isn't midnight.' He jogged up the aisle until he reached the final row, and then he shuffled awkwardly past the seats until he reached the seat in the middle of the row, directly underneath the projector booth, where he flopped down and slouched as low into it as he could manage, given the lack of leg-room.

'Clever chap, that Albo,' he commented aloud to himself. 'Very knowledgeable. Far too well educated to spend his life working the front desk of a flea-pit like this. I mean, don't get me wrong, the idea of throwing it all in, all the traveling and adventures and the daring do and just settling down for a quiet life of a stress-free job and access to all the films I could ever wish to see is tempting.' He paused. 'No it

isn't, I'm lying to meself. But my point is that I get that not everyone wants to join the rat-race, put themselves out there, chase the dollar. I can understand why some people might regard Albert's life as perfect. The problem is, Albert isn't one of them. He's so eager to share his knowledge, and to help people, even if it's just walking them to a room they should be able to find by themselves. Mind you, people can get lost in the strangest of places.' The house lights dim and the curtains part to reveal the screen. 'Speaking of which…' he muttered to himself.

As the room darkened a beam of light flashed from the booth to the screen at the other end of the room. But instead of the kind of trailers or adverts that you would normally expect, the image on the screen was...of the cinema he was sat in, as though seen from the projection booth. Were he not slouched in his seat, the Doctor would have been able to see the back of his own head.

'Of course, most people who wander into this cinema by accident would assume this was just some kind of gimmick. Nothing to worry about. Most of them would probably turn around to try to spot the camera. Maybe wave. Maybe laugh.' Now the Doctor's tone was anything but jovial. 'Normally it would be quite a while I'm sure before any of them knew that something was wrong. But not this time. Because normally the audiences have no experience of extra-terrestrial technology, or a sense of what it feels like to be in the presence of something alien. Most people, when they feel it, don't understand what the feeling means and dismiss it. But this time, in the audience was a young woman.'

A humming noise began to build, almost imperceptibly at first. The Doctor heard it, but carried on.

'Her name was Rose. Rose Tyler. And she knows *exactly* how it feels to be in the presence of something alien. I presume she rumbled you pretty quickly. Tried to get people out of the room, or maybe ran up the aisles to where she thought the camera was. Never made it, of course. So, you took them all, and moved on. Took the whole of this construct and just left, presumably to re-appear somewhere else. You played it safe, and got the hell out of Dodge.

'The irony is, if you'd stayed put it would have taken me longer to find you. I knew she'd gone to the pictures but she could have disappeared before she got here or after she left. But my ship detected

you leave, and after a bit of research it wasn't hard to figure out what was happening.'

The hum continued to increase in volume. 'She wasn't investigating you, by the way. Just wanted to see a film and was unfortunate enough to walk into the cinema that you'd over-mapped with this facade. Now she's destined to spend forever on a screen, acting out whatever role you assign to her for the entertainment of those you serve. All her imagination and intelligence squashed down into improvising a film script, while you feed on the mental energy. Presumably you're keeping Albo as some kind of back-up, a spare battery for a rainy day. How long have you been doing this? How many screens are there really in this place? How many people have you taken?'

The only answer was the increased intensity of the humming which by now had become a roar. Still, the Doctor's tone remained level. 'Anyway, none of that's particularly important. All that matters is that I'm here to stop you.'

And for the first time since entering the screening room, the Doctor's words received a response - a mocking laugh that echoed from every speaker in the room.

'You know what your biggest problem is?' he replied. 'It's not that you're arrogant. It's that you're thick. If you weren't thick you would have been asking yourself how I got into the construct when you were between locations. You'd have been asking yourself why the internal dimensions have been all over the shop. And you'd *definitely* been asking yourself why someone who can enter the construct between physical manifestations would just wander in as though it were a real cinema.'

The roar by now was so loud that the Doctor could not hear even his own words. He carried on talking anyway.

'It's a shame I'm not the vain kind, because if I were I'd definitely have a mirror on me.' He reached into his pocket and gave a very bad impression of surprise. 'Well, well. Looks like I've been lying to you.' He pulled out a small hand-mirror. 'I had one with me the whole time. How about that?' And with a flick of the wrist, he threw the mirror upwards into the beam from the projector. The light bounced back upon itself and for a moment the screen showed the interior of the

booth, the projector and the silhouette of its operator, before all were rendered invisible by the intensity of the light.

'Let me explain. Your beam is trying to pull my mirror in, in the same way that it pulls in its victims, which is what is holding the mirror in the beam. But it can't, because the mirror is feeding the beam back in on itself. The dimensional anomalies are due to the fact that I materialised my craft – which is dimensionally transcendental – around the construct. The construct is trying to adapt but I'm afraid it's not quite clever enough. Put those two facts together and you get…'

The light from the beam reflected back on itself was spilling out of the projection booth like larva, surrounding the Doctor and dissolving every part of the construct that it touched.

'…complete disintegration. When the construct breaks down all that will be left are the things that are not a true part of it – the people, all safe within my TARDIS. The construct will cease to exist, and as you are nothing but its operating principle, you will cease alongside it. But you can perform one last duty. Tell your masters, Gods, or whatever they've set themselves up as that I know about them. And they'd better stay pretty quiet from now on, because if I find out that they're still pulling these kinds of tricks I'll be after them next.'

By now the Doctor was standing in a void comprised entirely of light, which started to dim around the edges, and he could just begin to make out the shapes of people, hundreds of people at least, milling around, confused, and one – short-ish, female, with blonde hair, dashing between them, checking that everyone was alright, reassuring an elderly gentleman wearing spectacles that there was no need to be frightened. It was going to be a pain to get everyone back to their own time-streams but as far as the world was concerned, none of these people ever went missing in the first place and there would be no more kidnappings by the construct. That, the Doctor reflected, had to go down as a successful day's work.

'And *that*,' he muttered under his breath as the blonde lady noticed his appearance and ran towards him, 'is all, folks.'

The Other Three Doctors

Iain McLaughlin

In that roiling spiralling maelstrom of primal energies that was the Vortex, the incongruous solid blue shape of a Police Box from Twentieth Century London on Earth spun through the waves of energy, effortlessly transporting its passengers towards their next destination.

Far, far away, a disc of sheer darkness sat in space, surrounded by a glowing spiral of matter and energy. A black hole devouring any object that was within range of its gravity. Planets, stars, entire solar systems… the black hole fed on them ravenously. As soon as the gravity had caught those bodies, they had been doomed.

Nothing ever escaped from the clutches of a black hole.

Except something did.

A bolt of light suddenly erupted from the heart of the black hole, travelling out through space faster than science deemed possible. It powered on, its trajectory unerring as it closed in on the co-ordinates in space and time where it would find its target.

A slight ripple in the space-time continuum sat in the path of the bolt of energy. As it reached the ripple, the energy tore through the weakened fabric of space/time and swam into the Vortex. Just ahead of it was the solid blue shape of its target.

The Doctor's TARDIS.

Inside the TARDIS, the ship's three passengers were gathered around the central control console, summoned by the flashing of a red warning light.

'What does it mean?' asked the smallest of the three, a dark-skinned girl named Alison.

'Really, Doctor,' the bearded man in neat, dark clothes said sourly. 'You must teach your pets at least something about the TARDIS. They're barely more than house-trained.'

‘Watch it, Tin-Man, or I’ll programme you to do the hoovering,’ Alison snapped at the Master before turning to the tall, cadaverous figure in the long overcoat who was moving around the control panel, reading displays and making minute adjustments.

‘I’m not sure,’ the clipped voice replied. ‘But it’s bad.’

‘How bad?’ Alison asked.

The Doctor clutched the control console and stared at Alison. ‘Start at ‘catastrophic’ and take it from there. Hold on!’

Alison and the Master both gripped the control console just in time.

The white bolt of energy tore through the Vortex, zeroing in on the blue box ahead. Without slowing it slammed into the TARDIS.

The TARDIS’s three inhabitants were thrown around the Control Room. Their grasps on the console had lasted seconds at best. The energy shook the TARDIS violently, like a ship caught in a wild storm at sea. Alison clutched at a heavy couch for support and felt a moment’s security before the floor bucked again and she was thrown over the back of the couch.

The Master had fared better. He had been thrown against one of the many columns in the Control Room and his mechanical body now gripped the column with all its power.

Somehow, the Doctor had fought his way to the control console and was draped over it, frantically operating controls. ‘Almost got it. Almost.’

‘You could try widening the dimensional stabiliser,’ the Master called mildly.

‘Quiet,’ the Doctor snapped, ‘or I’ll hide the oil and leave you to rust.’

The Master snorted. He had grown used to the Doctor ridiculing his new, mechanical body.

The Doctor reached out and flicked a switch on the console. Lights flared brightly inside the Control Room and slowly faded as the vibration shaking the TARDIS also abated.

Alison looked over the back of the couch. 'What was it, Doctor?'

'I'm not sure,' an unfamiliar voice replied. 'But I'll find out.'

All three of the TARDIS's passenger looked at the source of the voice. A man of average height with a mop of dark hair in a central parting above a face with a prominent nose, expressive mouth and rather sarcastic eyes looked around the room. An attractive young woman in a red pinafore stood behind him.

'Oh, God,' the man sighed. 'Not again.'

'Doctor?' the young woman in the pinafore asked. 'Who are these people?' She looked around the console room. 'And what's happened to the Console Room?'

'Doctor?' Alison asked. 'Why did she call him the Doctor?'

'Because he's the Doctor,' the woman in the pinafore replied, as if she was talking to a particularly dim child.

Alison shook her head firmly. 'He can't be.' She pointed to her tall saturnine companion. '*He's* the Doctor.'

'Doctor?' the other woman asked her friend.

'I'll explain later, Emma,' he answered. His eyes were focused on the tall man Alison had called *the Doctor*. 'So,' he said. 'You're me?'

The Doctor eyed the man standing on the opposite side of the console. 'And you're me?'

Neither man looked impressed.

'Incarnation?' Emma's Doctor asked.

'Ninth,' replied Alison's Doctor.

'Ninth?' Emma's Doctor said suspiciously. He moved towards the other Doctor, scrutinising him carefully. 'That's unlikely, because *I'm* the Ninth.'

Alison's Doctor stood up to the challenge and took a step towards this other Doctor. 'I remember my regenerations quite vividly. I *am* the Ninth.'

‘You can’t both be the Ninth Doctor,’ Emma said. ‘Can you?’

‘No,’ Emma’s Doctor answered. ‘We can’t.’ He peered at the taller Doctor thoughtfully. ‘Unless…’

‘Unless we can,’ Alison’s Doctor answered. He flicked switches on the console. Emma’s Doctor turned and did likewise. They moved around the console, working in silent unison for a few seconds until the console pinged. Both Doctors stared at readouts on the console.

‘Well,’ said Alison’s Doctor. ‘That explains it.’

‘Bugger,’ said Emma’s Doctor.

‘Translated that means what?’ Emma asked.

‘That we *are* both the Ninth Doctor,’ her Doctor replied.

‘How can you both be the Ninth?’ Alison asked, looking thoroughly confused.

‘We’re from different realities,’ her Doctor replied. ‘Parallel universes, if you can’t think of an original way to describe them.’

Emma’s Doctor looked at his counterpart with a hint of disdain. ‘This is disastrous. It’s bad enough when there are two of us from the same universe.’

‘I will heartily vouch for that sentiment,’ the Master agreed, moving to the console. ‘One of his at a time is more than annoying enough.’

Emma’s Doctor eyed the newcomer for a moment before raising his eyebrow in surprised recognition. ‘And you still haven’t mastered growing a full beard yet. Never mind. One day.’ He turn to Alison’s Doctor. ‘Why is he on board?’

‘He’s part of the staff. Does light house-keeping. Dusting, vacuuming, that sort of thing; looks after the diary… and because his mind is trapped in a robotic body which I have set control limits on, he can’t go around failing to conquer the universe.’ The taller Doctor sniffed. ‘All of his failures are very bad for Gallifrey’s reputation.’

The smaller Doctor rapped his knuckles on the Master’s forehead and seemed satisfied by the slightly metallic noise his action produced.

‘Do you mind?’ the Master snapped.

‘Not at all. Emma’s Doctor turned to his other self. ‘So, which of us is in the wrong reality?’

Alison’s Doctor inspected his readings. ‘These say we both are.’

His smaller self read quickly from a couple of screens. ‘Same here. It seems we’ve been slipped sideways out of our own space-time continuums.’

‘Indeed,’ the taller Doctor agreed. ‘I can see our traces here. Yours, mine…’ he paused, scrutinising the readings. ‘And another?’

‘Another?’ Emma’s Doctor asked. He quickly operated a few control. ‘You’re right. There’s a third trace.’ He flipped a switch. ‘Got it?’

‘Yes,’ Alison’s Doctor agreed. He slid his hands across the controls.

The scanner screen fritzed and crackled. ‘Hello? Hello?’ An elderly white haired man with a neatly clipped moustache was peering at them from the screen. An attractive dark haired young woman with dark hair was at his shoulder. ‘Hello? Can you hear me there?’

‘Brace yourself, Grandad,’ Alison’s Doctor called. ‘You’re coming in hard!’

Emma nudged her Doctor. ‘Do you all do double entendres? It’s like living in a Carry On film.’

The TARDIS shook for a moment and the lights flared violently. When the lights dimmed, the elderly man and his young companion were standing near the TARDIS’s front door. They were looking around in shock.

‘Well, ‘pon my soul,’ the old fellow said. ‘What a splendid contraption.’

The young woman moved to his shoulder and pointed at the group of people around the control console. ‘There they are, uncle.’

The man made his way across to the console where the two Doctors stood side by side, waiting for him. ‘How do you do,’ he said, shaking

their hands in turn. 'I am Dr Who, and this,' he indicated the young woman who had followed him, 'is my niece, Louise. My grand-daughter, Susie is…' he looked around. 'Oh, she's not here, is she?'

'No, uncle,' Louise said. 'Barbara and Ian took her to Oxford for the day, remember? And I was on my way to a date with that policeman boyfriend of mine.'

'Oh, yes. We must remember to collect him from Pompeii before that nasty business with the mountain.' He turned to the Doctor. 'And you are?'

'I am the Doctor,' said Alison's Doctor.

'And so am I,' said Emma's.

The old man frowned. 'I'm afraid I don't follow.'

'Which incarnation are you?' the taller Doctor asked.

'Incarnation?' Dr Who shook his head. 'I'm afraid I have no idea what you're talking about, my dear fellow.'

The two Doctors exchanged a look. 'Contact?' asked the taller Doctor.

'Contact,' nodded the smaller of the two.

Dr Who smiled benignly. 'Could you possibly explain…'

The old man stopped abruptly in mid-sentence. His face had glazed. The Doctors had also gone quiet, their faces also impassive.

'What's happening?' Louise asked. 'Uncle?'

'I don't know,' Alison admitted.

'Nor me,' said Emma. 'But it's shut them up so it can't be all bad.'

The Master moved closer, examining the three men. 'They are communing telepathically. It's the quickest way for Time Lords to communicate, especially if they are the same Time Lord.'

'What are Time Lords?' asked Louise.

The Master looked at her in surprise. 'You don't know? He hasn't

told you?'

'He doesn't know,' the taller Doctor said, blinking his eyes.

Emma's Doctor inhaled deeply. 'He's not exactly the same as us.' He eyed the tall, pallid Doctor by his side. 'For which, in some cases, he should be grateful. However, he is still, by and large, us.'

'Only completely different,' Alison's Doctor added.

Dr Who mopped a handkerchief across his brow. 'Well, this is most extraordinary,' he said. 'Most extraordinary indeed.'

'Sit down, Uncle,' Louise said, leading Dr Who to a stool.

'Thank you, my dear. Most kind.'

She leaned over and kissed the top of her uncle's head.

Emma dug an elbow into her Doctor's ribs. 'Oi. Eyes front. And I don't mean her front. Just because she looks like she's marched out of a Hammer film, cleavage-first.'

'Oh, sorry,' he smiled sheepishly.

Alison's Doctor peered at his readings. 'The situation is this – an energy beam of unknown origin has three TARDISes from across multiple realities and is trying to pull us back to wherever it originated from.'

'Which is where?' Emma asked.

'We don't know,' her Doctor replied.

'What kind of energy is it?' asked Alison.

The taller Doctor replied, 'We don't know that either. But we're sure it's not a natural phenomenon.'

'Who's responsible?' Emma pressed.

'Nope,' her Doctor answered.

'Can we break free of it?' Alison continued.

'Oh, yes, excellent, we have an answer for that,' her Doctor beamed.

Emma returned the smile. ‘Good.’

‘No, we can’t break free,’ the smaller Doctor said ruefully.

Emma’s smile died. ‘Not so good.’

The Master stepped into the heart of the discussion. ‘Doctors, while I am immortal in this body, I will surely be driven into insanity by spending millennia in such turgid company. Given that your miserable consciences have denied you the more interesting aspects of life, I will offer a thought. The energy holding us could crush all three TARDISes as easily as you sneeze. I honestly miss sneezing, by the way. However the question to ask is, why has the energy held back from destroying the TARDISes?’ He looked from Doctor to Doctor, waiting for an answer.

The tall, sallow Doctor replied. ‘Because it wants us alive?’

‘You get there eventually.’

‘So, said the shorter Doctor. ‘What do we do?’

Dr Who pulled himself to his feet and moved across to the console. ‘Surely that is obvious, my boy. If we cannot escape, we must face our foe in his den.’

The smaller Doctor’s head tilted thoughtfully. ‘You mean let it take us?’

Dr Who nodded keenly. ‘Indeed I do.’

‘Do you see an alternative?’ the Master asked. ‘Preferably one that involved nobody dying – especially me.’

‘No, I don’t,’ Emma’s Doctor admitted.

Alison’s Doctor reached for the console. ‘In that case, hold on. We’re in for a bumpy ride!’

He slammed his hand down on the control, releasing the shielding protecting the TARDISes. The ship lurched violently and was filled by screams.

Across the realities, three TARDISes, joined as one, allowed themselves to be gripped fully by the beam of energy which enveloped

them. An instant later, as if yanked on a giant piece of elastic, the energy shot back through the Vortex, into real space and hurtled at impossible speeds towards the black hole.

A moment after the TARDISes and energy bolt had disappeared, another TARDIS flitted through that unstable piece of trans-reality within the Vortex. Inside that TARDIS a tall man with close cropped hair, a prominent nose and a prodigious pair of ears, made a slight adjustment to ease his craft through the distortion. 'Easy does it,' he said in a distinct Manchester accent. 'Unusual readings there. Fantastic.' He turned to the small blonde girl beside him at the console. 'Where to, Rose?'

By the time Rose answered, the three TARDISes that had been ripped out of the Vortex had passed through the black hole into what lay beyond.

Alison opened her eyes. It hurt and she thought it was obviously a bad idea so she closed them again. A few seconds later she heard movement and she opened her eyes again, but very cautiously. She saw her half a dozen companions slowly coming to.

'Well,' said Dr Who. 'That was most exciting. Yes, most exciting.'

Emma looked thoroughly green about the gills. 'I'll tell you after I stop throwing up, shall I?'

The three Doctors congregated around the console. Though the controls were alien to him, the readings somehow made sense to Dr Who. 'Gentleman, if I read these extraordinary devices correctly, it would seem that he have passed through…' he looked at his other selves.

Alison's Doctor nodded. '…through a black hole.'

'And into a universe of anti-matter,' finished the third. He sighed. 'We're stuffed.'

'How bad is this, Doctor?' asked Alison the one she saw as *her* Doctor.

'Remember I said catastrophic?'

'Yes.'

‘Well, it’s much worse than that,’ her Doctor admitted.

‘Oh.’

Dr Who tentatively reached out and operated a control on the console. The screen flickered into life, showing a delightful green meadow outside. ‘This would appear to be where we are.’ He eyed the console again. ‘Atmosphere, gravity and radiation levels are all roughly at the normal for Earth.’

‘Or Gallifrey,’ Alison’s Doctor added thoughtfully.

‘Well,’ Emma’s Doctor said. ‘Shall we go outside?’ He eyed his taller self’s vaguely vampire-like appearance. ‘Unless sunlight is bad for your skin.’

The taller Doctor ignored the jibe. ‘Can we get on before I regenerate out of boredom?’

‘Shall we go?’ Dr Who asked, heading for the door. ‘Come along Louise, dear.’

Louise took her uncle’s arm and they headed for the door.

Alison’s Doctor reached for the door control but the Master pulled the lever first. ‘I assume you want me to stay here and not steal anything?’ the robot asked.

The tallest Doctor was about to agree but stopped. ‘No, you may be a dangerous psychopath but you’re also a genius. You could be useful.’

‘Oh, Doctor,’ the Master replied sarcastically, ‘you flatter me.’

The Doctor operated a control on the console and a small drawer opened revealing a simple control pad, which the Doctor slid into his pocket. ‘Any mischief and I’ll switch you off.’

‘Perish the thought, Doctor. Perish the thought.’

The meadow smelled of summer. The grass was thick and lush. On the warm breeze came the sweet scent of flowers. A small, mouse-like creature scuttled to the top of a small mound, looked around at then scuttled off through the grass.

‘A rovie,’ Emma’s Doctor told her.

‘So we’re on your planet, Gallifrey?’ she asked.

‘Unlikely, my dear,’ Dr Who replied. ‘Unless Gallifrey has imported jasmine,’ He sniffed the air appreciatively. ‘Yes, definitely jasmine.’

‘He’s right,’ Emma’s Doctor confirmed. He indicated a forest off in the distance. ‘And those are undoubtedly Pine trees.’

They took their time walking to the top of a small rise. The Master reached the top first. ‘I assume *that* is where we are going,’ he said, pointing.

On the other side of the hills was a large house eclectically made of numerous styles that had been mashed together. It was a mongrel of design and should have been a mess. Instead it was a comfortable, homely place.

A dark haired woman, apparently of around thirty five looked up from her gardening and saw the group slowly coming over the hill towards the house. She smiled and hurried back indoors.

It took a few minutes for the group to reach the house. As they drew closer, burly men who could only be guards appeared at various intervals around the large garden of the property. They didn’t emerge from hiding or from a building, they simply *appeared*. None of them spoke. They just watched the group moving closer. As they reached the steps leading up to the porch, the front door opened. A middle aged man with slicked back greying hair, piercing blue eyes and a hooked beak of a nose looked out at them. The young woman was visible inside the house behind him.

‘There you are at last,’ the man said. ‘Come in.’

They followed the man inside the house, which was remarkable spacious inside.

‘It’s bigger on the inside,’ said Alison’s Doctor. ‘It’s an interesting experience actually saying that myself.’

Their host smiled. ‘The rules of this universe are rather unusual.’

‘Really?’ Dr Who asked benignly. ‘In what way?’

The man shrugged… and the house was gone, replaced by a

burning expanse of desert with a great domed city in the background.

'Gallifrey,' Emma's Doctor said softly.

The host nodded and swished a hand through the air, and Gallifrey was gone, replaced by a pressurised dome deep in an ocean. Huge marine creatures swam around the dome. 'This world is subject to my will.' The dome disappeared and the original house was back, as was the beautiful woman. She had prepared refreshments for all of the guests.

'Interesting that you chose Gallifrey as one of the places to show us,' said the taller Doctor.

The smaller Doctor finished for him. 'Was there a reason for that? To make us feel on edge perhaps?'

'Or to make myself remember home?' their host replied.

Alison's head tilted his head curiously. 'You're a Time Lord?' he asked.

The man nodded. 'Not just any Time Lord,' he said. 'Not to be unduly immodest, one of the first.' He let his words hang in the air for a moment. 'One of the *very* first.'

'What does he mean, Doctor?' Emma asked. 'Who is he?'

The Doctors exchanged glances. 'It's one of three,' Alison's Doctor said. 'But I think he should tell us himself.'

'And I think it's entirely possible we should get ready to run.' He looked at Dr Who. 'Sorry.'

'Don't worry,' Dr Who replied. 'I'm much fleeter of foot than I look.' He looked at the man who had brought them through time and space. 'But I am most curious to hear your story, sir.'

The host bowed. 'Very well,' he said. Long ago when Gallifrey was a younger planet and the race had still to become Time Lords, three figures rose to dominate the planet. Rassilon and Omega were giants, rivals vying for power. Each thought he should lead, and each strove to prove his greatness by leaps in technology or great victories in battle. One of these great scientific advances was Omega seeking to harness

the power of a black hole to give Gallifrey unlimited power. It would give his people the ability to be Lords of Time.' He pointed at the Doctors. 'As you are.' The story continued. 'Omega knew that he would have to send a ship into a black hole to harness its energy. He told everyone that he would pilot the ship himself.'

'So you are Omega,' the Master said. He sounded awed by the thought in being in the company of such a legend.

The man continued his story. 'Omega lied. Omega often lied.' He sighed. 'I told you there were three dominant figures. Omega contacted that third figure and asked his opinion of the ship. When his colleague was aboard he launched the ship into the heart of the black hole. The only way that man could survive was to follow the instructions left by Omega. I was that Other man, and in passing through the black hole I gave my people the power to be Time Lords.'

The two Ninth Doctors shook their heads. 'That's not how it happened in our realities,' he said. 'Omega was lost in the black hole.'

'But not in mine,' the Other said bitterly. 'Omega sent me into the black hole expecting me to die. I refused. I found a way to live, even in this anti-matter wilderness. I found a way to create a universe I could mould to my will, and I spent the millennia after that trying to find a way to escape or to reach out from my prison. I quickly learned to see what had happened to my world in my absence. The rivalry between Rassilon and Omega grew until it could only be stopped with bloodshed… and that is what happened. Both men wanted to lead and neither would give way to the other. Every advance we have strived for and discovered went into a battle between Rassilon and Omega which devastated not only Gallifrey but our entire universe. They battled through time and space until there was nothing left to rule. My universe lies in ruins. The despair broke my hearts. But from my position here I learned to see other realities, other universes which ran along similar paths to my own. I learned to see all of the quantum realities, and I saw the good that could happen. I saw the good that you do, Doctor.' He paused and looked at all three Doctors. 'I saw the good you *all* do, *Doctors*.' He smiled benignly. 'And I know of the… affinity you have with me.'

The Master's brow furrowed. 'Affinity?'

The Other ignored the Master's question and simply scowled at the robot. 'I have also seen this scoundrel. So much potential thrown away.' He turned back to the Doctors. 'I have watched you all with pride and summoned you here because I need you.'

The shortest Doctor nodded. 'We'll do anything we can.'

'Of course we will,' Emma's Doctor agreed, unwilling to be outdone by his smaller self.

'Within reason, of course' added Dr Who cautiously.

The Other eyed the old man with interest. 'You are different than these,' he nodded. 'Your story is more twisted and complicated. Your father added a complication to your line, but you are largely the same.'

Dr Who clasped his hands firmly behind his back. 'But different enough to be rather less impressed than my friends here.'

The Other chuckled. 'They would never speak to me this way.'

'When we shared our thoughts I gained an insight into them,' Dr Who replied. 'I believe they would. Please tell us what help you need from us.'

'I need to return to my own universe,' the Other said simply.

The tall, saturnine Doctor pushed his hands into the deep pockets of his coat. 'So you told us.' He sounded more wary than he had a few moments before.

The Other waved a hand around, indicating the world around them. 'I can't just leave this universe. I need someone to replace me or it collapses before I leave and I am unable to use the exit point.'

The Doctors exchanged glances as the plan made sense. 'So you want us to take your place,' Dr Who said mildly.

'One of you, yes,' the Other confirmed.

Emma's Doctor rubbed his chin. 'So that you can go back to do good work in your universe?'

'To save my universe, yes,' the Other said vehemently. 'You have all done so much for your universes, I was sure you would understand.'

‘What of our universes?’

‘What?’ The Other turned to see the source of the question.

The question had come from Emma. ‘What happens to our universes if you take the Doctors out of them?’ she asked. ‘Your universe needs you. But our universes need the Doctors. How many of our people will die if one of him has to stay.’

The Other looked uncomfortable. ‘I cannot help that. I’m sorry.’

Alison picked up from Emma. ‘The Doctor has saved worlds from invasion or being destroyed. You would sacrifice one universe to save your own?’

‘What alternative do I have?’ the Other demanded.

‘To find another way,’ Louise said firmly.

‘There is no other way,’ the Other said firmly.

‘No,’ Dr Who said. ‘There is always another way.’

‘It’s up to you to find it,’ Alison’s Doctor said.

Emma’s Doctor nodded. ‘And if you don’t find it, if you get a knock, you keep working.’

The Other stared at the three Doctors. ‘Who are you to talk to me this way? I can make you do whatever I want in this world. I can force you to take my place.’

‘You know exactly who we are,’ the tall Doctor snapped.

‘And we know *you*,’ Emma’s Doctor said pointedly.

Dr Who shook his head sadly. ‘Although it seems that you have forgotten who you are.’

‘Never be cruel or unkind,’ the smaller Doctor said.

The tall Doctor continued, ‘Never give up.’

‘Don’t give in to despair,’ Dr Who added.

The three Doctors took a step closer to the Other. ‘Remain true to

yourself,' Emma's Doctor said.

'And fight… fight to find your way forward,' said Alison's.

'We will help you,' Dr Who said kindly. 'You needn't face this problem alone.'

The Other faced the three Doctors. The moment stretched, as if all of their minds were locked in some kind of struggle, before the Other sucked a deep breath.

'Thank you,' he said quietly. 'For reminding me of who I am. Thank you.' His shoulders slumped. 'You may all go. I release you.'

Dr Who smiled gently. 'Thank you but no.We will stay to help you find a way.'

'Thank you.' The Other shook his head firmly. 'But you are right. You have your own universes.'

Alison's Doctor sniffed. 'And we'll go back to them when the time is right.'

The Other sighed with relief. 'Thank you, all of you.'

Emma's Doctor rubbed his chin thoughtfully. 'The first thing will be to look at the work you've already done and to take it from there.'

'There is another way,' a rich voice said.

They all turned to look at the Master.

'There is?' Dr Who asked.

The Master moved towards the Doctors. '*I* will stay.'

The statement shocked Alison's Doctor. 'What?'

'Is your hearing impaired as badly as your fashion sense?' the Master asked.

'Why would you volunteer for this?' the tall Doctor demanded.

The Master sniffed. 'To be free of you, Doctor?'

The Doctor snorted. 'Well, if you're going to be personal about it.'

The Master looked around himself eagerly. 'How long would you have me live in the TARDIS as your pet, Doctor? I am not a canary to be kept in a cage.' He glanced around the house. 'I have longed for a universe to bend to my will, to be the master of… everything.' A smile spread across his face. 'Yes, Doctor, I will stay here. I relieve you of your role as jailer.'

'Doctor?' the Other asked.

The tall Doctor took a step closer to the Master. 'This is no more freedom than you have in my TARDIS. Only the illusion of it.'

The Master shook off the warning. 'An eternity in your TARDIS under your control or an eternity as a god in my own universe… what do you think I will choose, Doctor?'

'He's made his mind up,' Dr Who said.

'You won't change it,' Emma's Doctor agreed.

'All right,' the saturnine Doctor conceded. 'How will this work?'

A shaft of light appeared in the middle of the room and as they looked upwards, it seemed that the house's ceiling now stretched up infinitely. The Other moved towards it. 'When I step into this singularity I will be returned to Gallifrey at the moment I appeared to go through the black hole. I will stop my world, my universe from the carnage of those maniacs.'

Dr Who indicated his companions. 'And what of us?'

The Other answered quickly, 'This universe, at least as you see it, will cease to exist when I leave, until my successor establishes his control.'

Emma's Doctor forced a smile. 'At risk of repeating myself, what about us?'

The space to the side of the column of light shimmered and solidified into the reliably study blue shape of the TARDIS.

'You will be inside your ship. When I leave, so will you.'

The tall Doctor turned to the Master. Both he and Emma's Doctor

seemed slightly lost for words. 'So, this is the end,' the taller said finally.

The Master held up a hand to stop him. 'No goodbyes, Doctor. Ours is not a sentimental association.'

'No, I suppose not,' Alison's Doctor conceded.

'Well, now you have what you always wanted,' Emma's added. 'Good luck with it.'

The Master looked at his old enemy, perhaps his old friend, impassively. 'Do try not to be bored without me.'

'I'll get by,' Alison's Doctor replied.

Emma's Doctor opened the TARDIS door and the party filed inside. The tall, sallow Doctor was last to go inside. He gave the Other a curt nod and then looked at the Master, who met his gaze levelly, before the Doctor went inside the TARDIS and closed the door.

A moment later the great column of light flared. 'Are you ready?' the Other asked.

The Master nodded. 'Without a doubt.'

'Then I wish you good luck.' With that, the Other stepped into the great beam of light, and was gone. At the same time, the TARDIS shimmered out of existence.

An instant later, the building surrounding the Master disappeared, replaced by primal energies that tore at his body. He screamed, but his mind focused, forming a protective field around himself. That act was enough to allow the Other and the TARDIS to escape. His mind began reaching out, touching the world around him, understanding how to mould it and he slowly started flexing his mental energy, building a world for himself. A simple square room. White walls. He needed a chair… and he had a chair. The Master smiled and settled into his chair.

Omega strode along a corridor. In his mind he ran through the speech he would give of his dear friend's act of self-sacrifice, of his beloved colleague taking the ship because he knew Gallifrey could not survive without Omega. There was some degree of truth in that.

Everyone knew that Gallifrey couldn't survive without Omega.

He would suggest a statue for his fallen comrade.

Omega turned the corner and strode into the great council chamber. He slid the mask of sadness over his friend's death carefully into place… and stopped short. There, sitting in his usual place beside Rassilon was the third member of their triumvirate. A tight ache gripped his stomach. He could see through the beatific smile of his two colleagues. He knew that his play for power was already defeated.

The TARDIS hurtled through time and space, sliding into the Vortex.

Inside the ship, three Doctors and their companions were preparing to return to their own realities.

Dr Who was running his hand appreciatively over the TARDIS console. 'This is a far superior ship to my own and yet…' He gave that charming smile. 'I'm sure mine will grow and develop as we work on it.'

'And now you understand what you are?' Emma's Doctor asked.

'It seems I will develop and change, too,' the old man said.

'What do you mean, uncle,' Louise asked.

Dr Who winked at Emma's Doctor. 'I'll tell you later.'

The tallest of the Doctors glanced up from his readings. 'We're almost back to the position we were taken from.'

The smaller Ninth Doctor offered his other selves a wry smile. 'Well, I'd like to say it's been a pleasure…'

'…but you're not going to,' the taller Doctor replied. His counterpart only smiled. 'Do try to stay out of my universe in future,' the tall Doctor continued.

'I shall miss that cheerful face.'

The console bleeped. 'We're in position.'

The Doctors and their companions made their farewells.

The TARDIS spun through the maelstrom of the Vortex. For a moment, the blue box shimmered and there seemed to be a double echo of the ships at the TARDISes split, returning to their own realities. It lasted only a moment before the TARDIS sailed on towards… who knew where?

The Master settled into his chair. Chair? That didn't do it justice. He preferred to see it as a throne. He had reconstructed his universe in the image of the Capitol on Gallifrey. He had always felt that he should run the Capitol anyway. The first thing he had done was construct people to fill the place. He had even made them, within reason, autonomous. They would interact with each other, have lives. When he spoke to them there would be things about them he didn't know. He wouldn't actually *care*, but that slight freedom and individuality made them more *real* and he knew that would protect his sanity in the long run.

In front of him, each of them down on one knee, were the eleven he had taken most care in creating. The grumpy old one with the hook nose, the short one with a mop of black hair, and that tall dandy who had thwarted him so often… he had needed scientific minds to help take part of the burden of his work from him. It appealed to him to make them in the images of his most loathed enemy. All nine Doctors from his universe and the two others he had just met. At last the Doctors did exactly as he wanted.

'I wanted you here for this,' he said. 'I wanted you here for my rebirth.' He slipped into that most unique part of a Time Lord's mind, the part that controlled regeneration, and he willed himself to regenerate.

His body was mechanical. Sending that impulse should have had no effect. But in this universe, his will was law and he felt that familiar burst of wild energy coursing through his body. He actually *felt* again. He stared at his hands, glowing golden with regeneration energy. He felt the energy coursing through him until it erupted out of his body through his arms and head.

Abruptly it stopped and he gasped a deep breath.

A breath.

His robotic body hadn't felt the need to breathe. The sensation of air in his lungs again… he hurried to a mirrored surface. He was tall and slim, with dark, intelligent eyes. His dark hair was matched by a neatly trimmed goatee beard.

'Much better.' The voice was slightly nasal and sarcastic. He liked it. 'Well, you lot,' he said, pointing at the Doctors. 'I've given you the best brains in the universe – this universe anyway, apart from mine. I want you to start working on a way to get me out of here.'

The men spoke in unison. 'Yes, Master.'

Deus Ex Food Machine

Roy Gill

I sat on the coach in the TARDIS lounge, my fingers picking at the bindings on my leather gauntlets.

'Here, let me –' said Barbara.

I offered a smile of thanks.

The Doctor was as brisk and blithe as ever. For such an old man, it often seemed to me he recovered surprisingly quickly from our various trials and excursions. 'I fancy we could all do with some dinner,' he announced. 'Venusian Night Fish for me.'

'Of course, Grandfather.' Susan crossed to the food machine, and started tapping buttons.

'Wait a minute, child! I haven't given you the code.' The Doctor drew a diary from his pocket and began to leaf through the pages. 'No, no, no… Ah, yes! That is it. X L 4 2 8 5 J… Or could that be a 'K'? Dear me. Whoever wrote this had the most appalling handwriting...'

Susan waited obediently. She had long since memorised the sequence for all the old man's favourites, but she would never have hurt his pride by pointing that out.

'Whoever tied these knots,' said Barbara, picking away, 'had the most devious technique possible.'

'That sounds about right.' I sighed and rubbed at the bristles on my chin. 'I can't wait to get cleaned up. My grooming has rather gone to pot these past weeks.'

'Oh, I don't know.' Barbara shot me a glance. 'I think that beard rather suits you, Ian.'

'Oh yes, Mr Chesterton. Do keep it!' said Susan, her eyes glinting mischievously. 'It's absolutely fab!'

'Hmmm. Don't think I can't tell when I'm being teased…'

I sank back on the coach.

It had been another of the Doctor's typical misadventures – and I was still recovering.

The TARDIS had come to rest in a beautiful – if strangely cramped – garden. We'd spent a pleasant enough twenty minutes investigating, while the old man had crowed triumphantly about successfully returning us to London. This was clearly an enclosed garden, attached to one of the grander houses of Belgravia, he declared. We would all soon be home, back to our tedious school and tedious human lives - and no harm done!

As we investigated further, the plants of the garden revealed themselves to be ever stranger in hue and construction, and so the Doctor's estimates as to our location grew steadily more exotic. It was, perhaps, an alchemists' private collection in 16th century Paris, he suggested, or failing that a lesser-known part of Mauritius. Finally, when confronted with a singing bloom that resembled a colossal dandelion, he grumpily conceded that we'd left our own galaxy altogether. All things considered, we would be best returning to the TARDIS and trying again…

Of course, things were not that simple.

Since we'd left the battered police box, a fierce purple cactus had sprung up and enshrouded it entirely. I was set to hack it with some secateurs I'd found in the alien equivalent of a potting shed, when all at once the inhabitants of the garden revealed themselves.

They were a deputation of lithe, willowy women dressed in flowing robes and an accompanying group of rugged warrior-like men.

Susan screamed – with very little provocation, I might add. The aliens were charming – and quick to assure us they wished us no harm. They were adamant we should not harm the cactus in any way, as it was sacred to them. Nevertheless, we were welcome to stay until the plant had finished its growth cycle – and then we could be on our way…

The aliens had a segregated society, and consequently I would be obliged to lodge with the men, whilst Barbara would stay with the women. The Doctor would sit on their counsel of Elders, as he was

clearly very wise and learned.

'Well… if you think it best,' the old man preened. He lifted his arm and draped his cloak around Susan's shoulder. 'Naturally, my granddaughter will remain with me.'

'As you wish.'

And so time passed, on this strange new world.

I had assumed at first I should be obliged to fight and compete with the warrior men – and would have to be on constant guard for some displaced favourite, wary of the newcomer who might seek to rival him.

It was so often the way.

But Zev, the leader, assured me otherwise.

'The ways of war have long left our people,' he said, in a husky voice.

He was a handsome chap, I had to admit. More a matinee idol Paul Newman-type, than a pugnacious Oliver Reed sort.

'But if we don't *have* to fight,' I said, tossing a medicine ball from hand to hand, 'what on Earth do we *do* here all day?'

'We can fight if you want,' Zev said gently. 'But there are many other ways to pass the time…'

It was an instructive and intriguing two weeks.

I saw Barbara but rarely.

They had a sort of television-phone arrangement that allowed me to speak with her. The clarity was exceptionally good – like being shown some sort of cinema film. She appeared looking regal beside her charming alien companion, Mila, and told me of her exploits in five-minute intervals. I missed Barbara dreadfully, of course, but compared to the time I'd spent in the company of the Aztecs or in Polo's caravan or marching with Alexander, our time on this world had all been remarkably pleasant.

The Doctor, naturally, had other plans.

He appeared one night, having snuck into the bedchamber I shared with Zev, and whispered indignantly in my ear. 'It's that blasted cactus, Chesterfield! I asked the council how long it would take for it to flower and wilt and so release my ship – and do you know what they said, hmmm? It would likely not be for another ten years!'

He wasn't willing countenance that. Not him!

'But if this cactus is sacred to these people,' I whispered. 'Shouldn't we just let it be?'

'Sacred balderdash!' he spluttered. 'I will not be confined in one time and place! Now pay attention, Chatterton. There are things I shall need you to do…'

There was no point arguing with him. Not once he'd set his mind on something.

It was the same wherever we went.

One moment he'd be piously telling Barbara and me that history was immutable, and we must never ever set out to change it. The next he'd be fermenting rebellions and questioning centuries-old religions, discovering new elements and setting fire to cities… There was always something – the old hypocrite!

Even the way he'd scrobbled the pair of us - snatching us from 1960s London lest we told the authorities we'd found a time machine in a junkyard and changed the future. (As if we were ever likely to!) And yet, wherever he took us since, there was always some new intrigue to become involved in…

It wasn't long before he had me sneaking out of the men's lodge at night, and clambering though tunnels, and into hidden chambers. Turns out there was a secret irrigation system for the garden. Water was transported from the sea, miles away, by a subterranean band of workers. They insisted they were quite happy in their watery labours, but the Doctor was having none of it.

As far as he was concerned, not everything in the garden was so rosy after all…

One quick rebellion later – and one shut-off water tap – and the

TARDIS-gobbling cactus wilted. We snuck away in the resulting fracas.

And now, here the Doctor stood, grinning and licking his fingers like some cartoon gourmet as he polished off another greasy pile of Venusian Night Fish – utterly oblivious to the chaos he'd caused…

Susan quietly placed a paper plate holding a white and pink chocolate bar-like food onto the TARDIS coffee table.

'And what's this?' I said.

'Why, eggs and bacon! What else!' the Doctor retorted. 'Your favourite!'

'And what if I don't want eggs and bacon? What if I fancied a change?'

I thrust the plate away and rose to my feet.

'You've always liked it before.'

'Maybe I didn't know any better!'

'Well, that's not a problem, dear boy.' The Doctor wiped his hands on his handkerchief and smiled ingratiatingly. 'What would you like instead?'

'I think I'd like…'

'Yes?'

'I don't know… Maybe…' I huffed. 'I want raspberries!'

Susan clapped her hand to her mouth and stifled a sudden giggle. Barbara looked concerned.

'Very well. Raspberries it is.' The Doctor consulted his diary and dialled buttons on the food machine. It hummed and whirred to itself before rattling out a stream of bright red cubes.

The Doctor passed me the paper plate without comment.

I took a cube and popped it into my mouth.

Perfect succulent sweet juice ran down my throat.

‘Disgusting,’ I lied. ‘And now, if you have no objections, I’m going to have a bath…’

I stalked out of the lounge and down the corridor. From behind me, I could hear the Doctor muttering – ‘Extraordinary! Most extraordinary!’ – and Barbara counselling patience.

I ignored them both.

Half an hour in the Doctor’s miraculous shower cubicle, with all its cunning jets and nozzles, slowly eased away my temper. I followed it up with a session beneath the haircutting helmet, waiting patiently as its tiny clippers whizzed and buzzed, chopping my straggly locks and methodically erasing my beard. Later, in my room, I selected my very oldest clothes from the wardrobe – the outfit of a Coal Hill School teacher. I think I wanted the comfort of the familiar. But as I stood in front of the mirror, I realised my old shirt was now tight around the shoulders and loose around the stomach.

All these hectic months in the Doctor’s company had changed me. There was no use dressing up as what I’d once been.

That Ian Chesterton had gone.

There was no point pretending otherwise.

I swopped the shirt for a looser silk affair that I had picked up in Cathay, and walked back along the corridor to the TARDIS lounge, thinking perhaps I’d seek a nightcap of some sort from the Doctor’s capacious drinks cabinet.

The old man was alone in the room. The TARDIS’s running lights were dim, the glow from behind the roundelled walls a night-time yellow. His head was stuck into the bowels of the food machine.

‘Doctor,’ I said. ‘Whatever are you doing?’

He pulled his head out. He was wreathed in wires and wielding some unusual kind of screwdriver.

‘Oh, there you are, Chatterfield. I was trying to discern what had gone wrong with the mechanism. Some kind of imbalance, I suspect. Maybe a surfeit of static in the ethereal buffers…’ He prodded a valve, unleashing a cascade of sparks and a sudden smell of fried chicken.

‘I don’t think anything is wrong.’

He frowned. ‘But your reaction, my boy. To those raspberries. They didn’t seem to please you at all. But there should be no reason I can’t fix it... It’s simply a scientific process of balance and combination after all. It’s just a matter of getting the ingredients right.’

I stared at him. This was the Doctor’s philosophy in a nutshell. Anything that didn’t work to his design could simply be messed around with until it did.

He prodded again with the screwdriver. This time the air was filled with an enticing aroma of Turkish coffee.

‘Doctor,’ I said gently. ‘Don’t worry about it. It’s quite simple, really. I used to have eggs and bacon every single day back home – and now I don’t. But sometimes, it’s quite good to sample other things.’

The old man’s eyes narrowed. He clutched his lapels. ‘You mean to say, your mind has been broadened? Through your travels with me?’

I sighed. ‘Yes, Doctor. Quite possibly it has.’

‘Excellent, my boy!’ He beamed. ‘I knew it couldn’t really be my apparatus at fault. It’s always been most reliable. Have you tried the Venusian Night Fish? Allow me to recommend it. Cooked in Martian honey, it’s simply exquisite.’

‘Perhaps tomorrow,’ I said.

‘Oh, there’s always time,’ he said. ‘Always!’

He shut the door on the machine.

Leo Reflects

Ian Potter

Well done, you broke the code! It was quite a clever one I thought- writing backwards and not in Italian and in a way that can hardly ever be seen. Uncrackable for centuries I reckon.

Just to clarify, I'm not really one for codes, no matter what you lot might think. One of the Doctor's fancy pieces tried to tell me I'd hidden a lot of coded stuff about Our Lord and what he'd got up to between sermons in my pictures but I'm afraid I never really followed it. I was rather too busy looking at the way her mouth moved. It really was quite a mouth…

It's a bit of a worry that, because obviously the pictures are full of references and symbols- it's what you'd expect. How else can you tell a story in a frozen moment? But it seems future generations have no idea how to read those stories. They can tell there are symbols there but they're having to make up their own meanings for them. I dread to think what they'll think the jokes in my cartoons are.

Anyway, yes, the Doctor, I've met a few of him as you know. I've never quite certain how many because some of the ones you're sure must be him turn out to not to be or at least not be yet, and he gets very cross if you tell him stuff he's already done before he gets 'round to it.

He swears blind he had nothing to do with the monkish fella with the thing for flying machines, and for ages I thought Bad Joe the painter down the way with the weird pigments was him, but apparently not. Being friends with the Doctor means I humour a lot of idiots, maniacs and people with no fashion sense unfortunately. I thought that Tancredi bloke was him for an age, he was just like some of the bossier ones.

He says he can't believe how often I've taken some madman off the street to be him, I'm amazed it doesn't happen more.

This is sort of a warning from the Doctor to any of you who use cameras- which apparently will end up being most of you. They're a terribly dangerous conduit to beings from other realms as it turns out, and you have to be particularly careful of anything blurry or

out of focus you capture. They're capable of change.

I had a camera before most people of course, a camera obscura. That's Latin for dark room, you know. The Doctor said that would be briefly and mildly funny for a period during the development of photography, so if you're reading this in the 20th Century I hope you enjoyed that.

I used mine principally as an aid to sketching. You can project an image on the wall with it, bung an easel in front and trace it. Used to save a heck of a lot of time.

I'd diversified a bit by the time what I want to tell you about happened. I'd discovered you could put chemicals on a canvas that would discolour it when light fell on them, which effectively meant I could use my camera obscura to make what I'm told you'll call photocopies. Few lenses here, few mirrors there and I was knocking off copies of Holy relics for fun and profit and faking up a few new ones too. My 'shroud of Our Lord' novelty bed spread was a great seller, though I think most of them ended up destroyed in the end. I liked the double bed version best with the bonus faces on the pillow cases I'd done to look like the Handkerchief of St Veronica, but it turns out not everyone has quite my sense of humour.

Well, I was there creating away, when the Doctor turns up, puckering the edges of reality a bit as he does as usual, and making all kinds of electrical sparks with his ungodly non-natural fibres and friends who walk funny. Zoe was the worst- I don't think she ever wore a thing made out of proper cloth, energy crackling everywhere like Vardans in nylon socks dancing around the Dalek city (what an afternoon that was).

These particular sparks went right into one of my mirrors, which you students of natural philosophy are no doubt aware is one of the worst things that can happen if you're trying to keep your dimensions tidy. Might as well just chuck in a bathful of quicksilver and have done.

The light from the spark bleached out a small section of my canvas, making a small pale circle right where one of the amusing bits was, and I was just about to throw the whole blessed sheet away when I noticed the circle was growing, and within it things were stirring…

The Doctor was suddenly quite concerned. Tiny eight-limbed men in hula hoops were growing within the sphere, slowly swimming into focus, all as naked as a harlot's lie. I was just trying to work out how the armpits and hips must work and discreetly avoiding

checking out their comically small generative organs, when I was grabbed by one of them- one of its arms impossibly extruding from the canvas into the room.

'He's been caught by the Vitruvians!' the Doctor bellowed to his friend. I forget which one it was now, one of ones who try a bit hard as I recall, because she tried to do a joke about that.

He was having none of it. 'We need to invert the local spatial polarities before the dimensions collapse at the interstitial nexus and front and back are turned irrevocably inside out.' He sold it as quite serious and important whatever it meant.

As far as I was concerned it seemed to mainly mean I was becoming flat and feeling colour drain from me as I was pulled backwards into my shroud of Our Lord bedspread by a four-armed man in a wheel. I had no idea what he wanted to do with me, but I was fairly certain my enjoyment of it was not at the top of his priorities.

I caught a glimpse of the Doctor, his face contorted in fear, as he waved his metal tube thing about. 'No, Leo! This can't happen- we haven't done the one where I show you the real Magi yet!' he screamed. 'I do that one when you're older.' His deep personal concern for me was quite touching.

He turned his metal wand into the mirrors and lenses at the heart of my photo copying apparatus and sent a blue bolt of light into the heart of it, even though he always protests the wand thing actually works with sound.

The world shook, everything smelled a bit like fried bacon and the sky boiled. There were some lovely chiaroscuro lighting effects actually and then everything went slightly dull and flat and I lost consciousness.

The next thing I knew the Doctor was standing over me, with his hair parted on the wrong side and all his buttons done up, his mouth all down at the sides, like the Mona Lisa's husband when he saw the finished portrait.

'We managed to reverse the hyperspatial incursion,' he said, 'but I'm afraid it was too late for you, Leo. We've trapped your essence in your mirror, frozen in a few stray moments of time. You'll be a still image in all but the most extraordinary of circumstances from now on.'

'Oh,' I replied, slowly taking in the fact I was pressed flat against a sheet of glass and no longer possessed of depth. 'How am I talking now?'

‘Extraordinarily well, given the circumstances,’ said the Doctor ‘I plugged a thing you wouldn’t understand into a thing I pretend to understand, it’s bought us a little grace.’ He made an odd sweeping loop in the air with his hand which was presumably meant to clarify this.

‘Right,’ I said, with remarkable sangfroid given everything. ‘So, what about the Magi then?’ I asked casually.

The Doctor’s face lit up. ‘Ah, yes, well a bit of good news there. That trip’s still on! I managed to save your reflection.’

I think I said ‘What?’ It was something like that.

From behind my mirror prison where he’d previously been hidden stepped me, or rather me as I had always seen myself reflected, every part of me flipped from left to right.

I smiled at myself, and I tried my best to return the smile.

‘Obviously, he’s just a simulacrum, a pale shadow of the proper you, he’s just rubbishy old mirror stuff, but close enough that I never clocked it back on that Bethlehem trip. Good eh? Causality saved!’

I expressed my delight as fully as I could.

‘The only drag is being reversed he’s going to be writing everything backwards, but I suppose history will just have to handle that somehow.’

So, that’s my story, frozen in a moment of time like a painting, hanging around the back of mirrors, like an urban legend, that annoying balloon kid, or an army of time travelling aliens in tanks who forgot to bring anything sparky with them, only coming to life when people look at me the right way or when dangerous energies or acrylic footwear are around. If you are reading me now, beware there are things in photos and mirrors you really don’t want to let see you, particularly not in those socks.

C♦O♦M♦P♦A♦N♦I♦O♦N♦S

Simon A Forward

Romana was holding court from the comfort of her favourite armchair. The TriBeCafé was fairly quiet that time of morning and they were safe to talk about pretty much anything they liked. With little to do until the next round of orders, the proprietor, Munster, was busy wiping down the bar, polishing it with such single-minded vigour that Romana wondered if he had some masochistic desire to see his reflection in the surface. Quite possibly it was his incredible ugliness that was deterring the customers. People in the Village could be so shallow.

At the moment, Turlough was taking his turn summing up one of his otherworldly reminiscences, and Romana went back to paying attention while considering whether another latté might be in order.

Turlough's story had Turlough, at least, on the edge of his seat. Even his freckles looked to be getting excited. 'So, I'm standing there on the deck of a sailing ship, you know one of those tall-masted types, and we're out in space.' He seemed to mistake the general disinterest for disbelief and poured on more earnestness accordingly, inching even closer to the edge of the sofa. 'Seriously. And it only transpires we're in a race. An interstellar regatta.'

Fitz plucked a string or two of his guitar then deadened the sound with his palm, before looking up. 'Yeah? What was the prize?'

'Enlightenment, would you believe.' Turlough shook his head, savouring the memory. 'Enlightenment.'

Jo's doll-like figure looked lost in the middle expanses of the sofa. She sipped delicately from her gigantic cup of frothy cappuccino and then wondered, 'Isn't that a fragrance by Calvin Klein?'

'Actually, it was a cheap crystal.' Edge of his seat or no, Turlough sagged.

Fitz laughed. 'Figures. Cheap crystal is a bit of a feature in your life story.' He tweaked the G-string, smirking for the benefit of his

audience. Romana may have been holding court – with her long fair hair and schoolgirl dimples, she retained plenty of princessly airs in her mannerisms and fashions - but Fitz generally plumped for the other armchair because it placed him centre stage. And because it gave him a good line of sight to the doorway – which meant all the ladies would get a clear view of him as they came in for their caffeine. 'D' you still carry that glass cube thing around in your pocket?'

Turlough shifted itchily under everyone's glances, but it was no use: the confession was already out there. 'Yes, yes I do as a matter of fact. So? It's not just a glass cube thing, anyway. It's only what kept me in contact with one of the most powerful beings in the universe, that's all.'

'The Black Guardian,' Romana dropped the name as casually as a name with that much capitalisation could be dropped.

'Why does *everyone* have to focus on the Black part?' Turlough budged back from the edge of the sofa, seeking the comfort of the full cushion. 'He was a Guardian, that's what counts. Of Time – and Space. And who knows what else.'

'And you kept the cube to remember him by,' remarked Jo, her wide innocent eyes giving no indication whether she was being supportive or having a gentle dig. Her bright smiles could out-dimple Romana's and her blonde locks made even her frowns seem like just another shade of sunny disposition.

'Well, it was all I had.' Turlough was doing his utmost not to sound too defensive, and failing dismally; which only made him more defensive. 'That was the closest I ever got to really *being* somebody.' He realised he'd fallen into his habitual trick of slightly misplaced emphasis. He searched their gazes for some measure of sympathy, but the closest he found was mildly sympathetic amusement. 'It was no joke being exiled from the Trion homeworld, you know.'

Jo, finally, accorded him with a sympathetic pat on the knee. 'No, I'm sure it wasn't. So why did you come back to Earth?'

Turlough wrinkled his lips and shrugged in defeat. 'It wasn't much of a tea party back on Trion either, as it turns out.' He managed a weak smile. 'So I thought I'd come back here voluntarily, you know,

see if I could get any more out of the place on a sabbatical. I didn't expect to end up in a humdrum nine-to-five existence.'

'Yes, what is it you do again?' Fitz raised the question because he knew it would irk. The fact was, nobody really knew. They weren't even sure if Turlough knew.

'So, anyway, you keep the glass cube thing,' Romana chimed in, by way of a conclusion, 'to remind you of when you held a higher place in the universal scheme of things.'

'Pretty much.' Turlough nodded.

'A cheap crystal,' observed Fitz, his smirk still alive and well and soaking up the rays of Turlough's humiliation. 'The highpoint of your life.' Turlough nodded.

'A glass cube thing,' said Jo.

Turlough nodded.

When the silence had stretched too painfully, finally he burst out, 'Now can someone please step in and divert all the attention from me for a bit?'

And incredibly, without having to throw a coin in a fountain, rub on a lamp, or commune with the all-powerful Black Guardian with a glass cube thing, his wish was granted. Because at that moment, Adric walked in.

'Hey,' Fitz called out, 'it's the dinosaur guy.'

Apparently, the greeting didn't do much to lift the lad's spirits and Adric took his time moping over before finally coming to a halt between Fitz's chair and one end of the sofa. He sort of hovered in place with morosely slumped shoulders and a hangdog expression. Hangdog in the sense that, Fitz was reasonably sure, if he retraced Adric's course to the coffee shop he'd find all the unfortunate canines who'd glimpsed the boy's face in passing strung up from the lampposts by their own leashes.

'Hi,' he moaned.

'What's up with you?' asked Turlough. ''You haven't wiped out the

dinosaurs - *again?***'**

Adric's scowl desperately wanted to render another dozen species extinct. Most especially Turloughsaurus Ironicus. 'As a matter of fact, in my dreams, yes.'

'Oh dear,' offered Romana, 'those nightmares still bothering you?'

'Ever since you rescued me, yes. I haven't had a decent night's sleep and the whole thing keeps playing over and over in my mind. It's *horrible.***'**

'You poor thing. Come over here and sit down.' Jo patted the sofa. Grudgingly, Adric moved over and plonked himself on the cushion next to her.

'If it's any consolation, the dinosaurs are resting. In peace,' quipped Turlough.

'Resting?' said Fitz. 'Resting? Those dinosaurs are dead. They're ex-dinosaurs. They've shuffled off this mortal coil. They're pining for the fjords. They're - '

'Yes, very funny,' Adric sulked under his own personal cloud. 'I don't think we need to hear the whole routine.'

Jo ruffled Adric's hair tenderly, taking pity on the boy. She shot Fitz and Turlough a look each. 'Just leave him alone, can't you? He's having a hard time of it, aren't you, Adric?' Her gaze settled principally on Fitz. 'Besides, I don't think they had fjords back then - did they?'

More coffee all round and Fitz was wolfing down a muffin, trying to catch the bulk of the crumbs in the paper wrapper, but noting with some eventual resignation that a fair few were determined to spill over the pleated edge and into the hollow bowels of his guitar. His fault, he supposed, for bringing the acoustic.

Adric was droning on about one of his adventures and Fitz realised that, in all the business with the muffin, he'd missed most of it. He'd caught the general gist though: The One With The South American Native With The Big Lip. It didn't give the impression of being especially gripping stuff, but Fitz welcomed anything that kept him

from going over another rerun of The One With The Dinosaur Killer.

As it was, another distraction caused him to miss the end of the current tale and he suddenly wished he hadn't started licking the crumbs from the muffin wrapper just a second before. Because this really cute, hot babe – who'd managed to magically combine cute and hot in exactly the right proportions – with just an extra dash of hot on the side – chose that moment to make her entrance. And suddenly, he could have wished for a chair with less of a clear line of sight to the door.

The fact that she was decked out in a pink bridal gown was an unexpected but, for the moment, minor detail. As was the fact that she seemed to be in a mild state of panic.

Nowhere to hide, his eyes fixated on the young woman's chest and trying to widen to accommodate her generous proportions, he peeled the wrapper from his tongue and hunted around quickly for somewhere to hide it. Naturally enough, it ended up stuffed down the side of the armchair.

'Hullo,' he drew the greeting out into a smooth pasta-like dough, 'how are you doing?'

She registered him properly for the first time, eyes narrowing and brow furrowing – cutely. 'Actually, not that good.' Her accent was a kind of nasal generic American, difficult to pin to any particular region.

She searched around, like someone who'd lost a friend in a football crowd, and it struck Fitz that she seemed out of breath. Something he should really have noticed earlier, given the length of time he'd spent observing the accelerated rise and fall of her chest. Not that he'd checked the rate against a stopwatch.

'I really need a coffee,' she said.

Turlough performed a pointed survey of the café. 'I think you need next door,' he said.

'Turlough!' Peri's jaw dropped. She shook her head, as though to get her eyes to settle into position. 'What the hell are you doing here?'

‘Peri Brown, ladies and gentlemen,’ Turlough introduced her. ‘She’s one of us.’

Fitz gave the girl a wave, wondering what was wrong with the universe when a babe like this was familiar to Turlough before she was familiar to him.

‘Hello, Peri. We’re all friends here,’ Romana explained. ‘With one thing in common in particular.’

‘That’s right,’ Jo nodded, tipping her head around for a better look at the newcomer – then turning around properly for a better look at her outfit. It was quite a lurid pink, and the jewellery and trimmings were verging on psychedelic. Really quite fab, in fact. She smiled. ‘It’s a bit of a lonely life, once you’ve been gadding about the galaxy with the Doctor. Quite a challenge to adjust. So a few of us have sort of come together here, you know, finding our way back to a normal everyday life.’

‘Yes,’ sighed Turlough expressively. ‘The mundane nine-to-five, common-or-garden, routine everyday earthly existence.’

‘Yeah,’ quipped Fitz, because he could never resist, ‘what is it you do, again?’ But Turlough wasn’t biting, except with a glare. Fitz returned his attention to Peri. ‘Anyway, we’re all friends here, like Romana says. We’re all pretty close,’ he added, with half a wink, then wondered if perhaps a wink wasn’t coming on a tad too strong having only just met the girl; but deciding ultimately that half a wink was going to look a bit odd, so electing to finish it properly.

‘Although some of us wonder what we’re really doing here,’ grumbled Adric.

The girl was a little wrapped up in her own problems, as well as that dress, to take much note of Fitz’s wink or Adric’s generally miserable air, and she clasped her hands and dipped into what was almost a curtsey, grateful and more than a little relieved to find herself in such good company.

‘Oh, you guys, this is terrific. You don’t know what a stroke of luck that is. Trust me, I am never this lucky. After I decided the marriage wasn’t going to work out, I just didn’t know where to go. So I just hitched a lift on the next temporal freighter.’

‘Adric knows all about those,’ supplied Turlough helpfully.

But Peri didn’t appear to know what to make of that. ‘He does, huh?’ She took a moment to digest that, but decided soon enough that she was better off pressing on. ‘Huh. Anyway, I hightailed it to Earth. Where I might at least stand some chance of feeling at home. But I never knew I’d be among such friends. The fact that you guys all know the Doctor. That’s great.’

‘Isn’t it?’ giggled Jo. ‘We all spend a lot of time sitting around in this coffee shop remembering our adventures with him. It helps, you know.’

‘It helps some of us,’ said Adric.

‘Laughter is the best medicine, mate.’ Fitz beamed.

‘So I suppose we’d all better squeeze up a bit here.’ Turlough budged up onto the arm of the sofa. ‘Make room for Peri.’ He looked her up and down, taking in the full spectacle of the gown. ‘So, uh, you were married then?’

Peri huffed and came around to the front of the sofa, where she planted herself between Jo and Adric. Her skirts bloomed out around her, making her look like an oddly dejected flower. ‘Yeah, the guy was okay – I mean, he was a king and everything. But it just hit me his name was an anagram of ‘crayons’ and I couldn’t take him seriously any more. That and the shouting. Trust me, the water wasn’t very inviting on Thoros Beta, but I kept going for swims just to get water in my ears.’

‘But, uh, you kept the wedding dress as a souvenir?’ Fitz raised a brow.

‘It’s fantastic,’ opined Jo, feeling the exceptionally fine lace, a tear welling in her eye and threatening her mascara. ‘It reminds me of when I left my own husband.’

‘You had a dress like this?’ Peri found that hard to believe.

‘No, but we had a wedding.’ Jo dabbed at her tears with her hanky. ‘We were halfway up the Amazon and it was just getting too difficult to carry on, you know. Nobody told me we’d have to do without so many

of the basic essentials we take for granted in everyday life.'

'Food, water - ' said Turlough.

'Nail polish, hairspray,' Fitz finished it off for him. They grinned. And Jo threw her hanky. But it didn't make for a very effective missile and landed in Adric's cup.

Adric retrieved it and toyed with it uncertainly, unsure of the correct etiquette of returning a lady's handkerchief when it was stained with the dregs of his coffee.

Peri looked at Fitz. 'Well, anyway, no, I kept it more for the hi-tech fabrics and the trimmings. The only money I've got are the clothes on my back.'

'Huh.' Fitz washed that thought down with a mouthful of coffee.

Thinking he'd quite like to be there when she cashed it in.

'Well, I've got to hand it to you,' mused Turlough, in reflective mood. 'It'll probably fetch more than a cheap crystal glass cube thing.'

And for once, everyone agreed he had a point.

They had Munster bring over an espresso for Peri, not so much because she needed the caffeine right now, hyped as she was, but mainly so she wouldn't be left out of the whole shared coffee-drinking experience. It was an important part of making her feel welcome that was unfortunately spoiled somewhat by the fact that she had to endure the sheer, undiluted ugliness of Munster's features leaning over her in close proximity. She accepted the cup with good – and swift – grace and only breathed out again when he beat a retreat back to the bar. Maintaining the polite smile in the face of that had clearly taken a lot out of her.

She knocked back the coffee in one go and set the cup down quietly, so as to avoid drawing him over to offer a refill. 'Sorry,' she told everyone, 'I don't think I've ever seen a guy with such a tightly clenched face.'

'Yes,' Jo did her best to soothe Peri's nerves with an affectionate touch to her forearm, 'he is a bit of a shock the first time.'

‘He had to replace a lot of glasses the first time Jo met him,’ said Turlough.

‘Yes, but far less the second time round.’ Fitz smiled. ‘And only one window.’

Jo blazed furiously at the both of them, but it just came out like one of her sunny expressions, only hotter. Peri was still following Munster’s movements with her eyes, making sure he was safely tucked out of the way behind his bar, before she spoke.

‘Are you sure you guys aren’t missing something here? If you ask me, there’s no way anyone gets to be that ugly starting life on Earth.’

‘What are you saying?’ quizzed Romana, sitting up. ‘He’s an alien?’

‘Oh, that’s just paranoid.’ Turlough gave a vexed roll of his eyes. ‘You can see conspiracies in anything if you want. Besides, we’ve left all that behind us and we’re supposed to be adjusting to *ordinary* lives.’

‘She might have a point,’ asserted Adric. ‘Doesn’t anyone else find it suspicious he’s the only ugly character around here?’

‘We’re in the Village,’ Jo argued sweetly. ‘It’s full of beautiful people.’

‘Can you make it sound any more like *The Prisoner?*’ said Fitz.

‘Now wait a minute, he might be onto something.’ Peri jerked a thumb at the street outside the window. ‘On my way here, even the bums were easy on the eye.’

‘Uh,’ said Fitz, ‘when you say bums, are we talking American or British?’

‘American.’

‘Oh, well in that case, she’s right,’ Fitz assured the rest of them. ‘I’ve even found a few of them attractive myself lately.’

‘Attractive?’ Romana arched an eloquent brow. ‘You mean female and alive?’

‘Some of them, yeah.’

‘Listen, even if he is alien,’ insisted Turlough, ‘we can’t *very* well do anything about it. It’s not our place any more. We’re adjusting to our everyday lives. Our ordinary, nine-to-five jobs, remember. It’s up to the Doctor to do something.’

‘The Doctor’s not here,’ protested Adric unnecessarily.

‘We ought to do something,’ averred Jo pensively.

‘Don’t look at me,’ said Peri. ‘I just got here. I don’t even have an ordinary nine-to-five job. Or even nine-to-nine-oh-five, come to that.’

Romana shifted forward to the edge of her seat, clasping her hands together. ‘Well, it couldn’t do any harm to investigate, I suppose. We can kill two birds with one stone, in fact. I have just the plan – Jo and Peri – if you’re willing. And you boys - Turlough and Fitz – can help Adric out with his problem while we’re in the business of sorting things out.’

Turlough and Fitz regarded each other almost as uncertainly as Adric regarded them and Romana. ‘What about you? What will you be doing?’

‘Actually…’ admitted Romana tellingly slowly, ‘I have a date.’

And on that minor bombshell, she launched into a mission briefing of sorts, made her excuses and ducked out of there before they could press her with all sorts of awkward questions.

She was sure they could manage without her for a bit: they must have learned something during their time with the Doctor.

‘Here, boy!’ Romana hurled the stick as hard as she could, sending it into a spinning arc out over the grass, and before it could complete a more than a few revolutions, much less dissolve to a shot of a Pan-Am orbital shuttle to mark the ascent of Man from Prehistoric to Space Age, K9 zapped it with his muzzle blaster. It fell to the ground as a scattering cloud of cinders. Romana had to throw a few more like the first before her ‘date’ finally showed up.

‘You’ve got him well trained,’ he observed.

‘Thank you, yes. He still has an impulse to run diagnostics on every lamppost that’s not quite up to par, but I’m coaxing him out of it

gradually.'

'That's very good to know. Good boy, K9!' He grinned. 'And what about the others? Managing all right, are they?'

'Yes, we've got quite a good group together now. Although heaven knows what'll happen if any of them decide to go their separate ways.' They walked along, Romana falling into an easy jaunt beside him, her hands in her pockets so she could exert some level of control over the flounce and twirl of her coat tails. 'I can't keep an eye on all of them – I only have the one pair and I can't be everywhere at once.'

'Oh, I don't know,' he pondered broadly. 'Technically, you could, you know. As long as you don't clash.'

'Hm, yes,' considered Romana dubiously, 'especially if I happened to be wearing the same outfit. That would be terrible.'

'Catastrophic.' The Doctor grinned.

'Mistress.' K9 trundled up and nudged her shin with his muzzle.

Romana glanced around her. 'I think he wants another stick.'

Munster really was incredibly ugly. There was some debate among the group as to how his ugliness could best be described, with Turlough of the opinion that the fellow had fallen into a vat of ugli fruit as a child, while according to Fitz their coffee shop proprietor had the kind of face that back ends of buses would be wary of bumping into, but had unfortunately been unable to avoid repeated prangs. Adric hadn't anything much to say on the matter and generally the women were inclined to be kinder, but being kind had been so much easier when they hadn't had to deal with him up close and personal.

Peri and Jo approached the bar nervously, exchanging a glance to brace each other. At least, seeing him in these everyday down-to-earth surroundings, engaged in the entirely mundane activity of laying out bar towels, made him a good deal less scary.

Even if it didn't do much for his looks.

'Can I help you?' he demanded gruffly, somehow forcing the words out past a lower lip that stretched almost up to the base of his pug nose. From the voice, he sounded like he gargled pebbles and smoked

at least forty a day. He regarded them with deep-set beady eyes. His features reminded Jo of a leather handbag she'd once had, that she'd sat on. Whereas Peri, for some reason, had visions a Boxer dog and a Pekinese scrapping over a leather handbag, reaching an unexpected draw and deciding to reproduce instead, ultimately coming up with Munster as the best they could do between them.

It did explain why there weren't a whole lot of mirrors behind the bar.

'Um,' Jo piped up first, 'we'd like to apply for jobs.'

'Yeah,' Peri backed her up. 'As waitresses.'

He looked from one to the other, scrutinising them intently. Although to be fair, he could have been aghast and his eyes couldn't have managed anything wider than beady.

'My name's Jo,' supplied Jo helpfully. 'And this is Peri. We have seen it busier in here and we thought you could use the staff. You know, for the busier times.'

'Hurgh!' Munster grunted. But if Peri was gauging the beadiness right, there was a good chance he was thinking it over. Finally, he nodded at Jo. 'What experience do you have?'

'Well, I was trained in British Intelligence and I worked as the assistant to the Scientific Adviser for a top secret international organisation established to defend the Earth from sentient life forms from other planets.' She pursed her lips suddenly, afraid she might have said too much.

Munster growled quietly. 'I meant more relevant to the service industry.'

'I used to make the tea. A lot.'

The proprietor gave a gravelled huff. Then looked at Peri. 'And you?'

Peri swallowed. 'Well, I majored in botany, but I picked up plenty of archaeology from my stepfather. I was assistant to a scientist guy too – the same guy as her, in fact, but in kind of a different capacity, you know, and we crammed a hell of a lot in on our travels. One time, I was

absorbed by a sentient marine sponge and laid open to the experience and perspective of every living thing on an entire planet. And I had a spell as a military leader, but I'd rather not go into the details right now. And most recently I was queen of a warrior race of humanoids leading an uprising against their slug-like masters.'

'And did you make any tea or coffee?'

Peri cast her mind back. 'Not really, no.'

The fellow's eyes went a lot beadier all of a sudden and stayed that way for an awfully long time. Peri had the sinking feeling that they'd blown it. Their best hope now was that he was as lonely as he was ugly and he might just be persuaded to hire them out of the need for some company around the place.

'Now don't take this the wrong way,' said Turlough, laying a hand on Adric's slumped shoulder, 'we're only trying to help. But your trouble is you sit around at home fretting over that one equation – and it's over and done with. You can't go back and do anything *about* it now.' He tutted, finding it difficult to inject more than a smidgen of sympathy into such a short sound. And one look around Adric's apartment was enough to mutate sympathy into pity, couched in the satisfying knowledge that he wasn't as much of a sad geek as this poor lad. 'There's so much more to life than Fermat's Theorem, Pythagoras' – Thing, and Napier's Bones.'

'Yeah.' Fitz looked over one of the worryingly complex mathematical textbooks and placed it gingerly back on the stack where he'd found it. 'There's fossils.'

Turlough glowered at Fitz. Adric shucked off Turlough's hand and rounded on the two of them. All around him was the paper chaos of a life obsessed with calculations, an apartment surrendered to the role of office and mathematical think tank. Somewhere under the reams of printouts there were a couple of computers, a couch and, Fitz was desperately hoping, a TV. It was nearly time for *Baywatch*.

'What do you know? What do any of you know?' Adric found it hard to blaze convincingly with his pasty, boyish complexion, but he gave them his best effort. And reserved the final glare for Turlough. 'And it's Pythagoras' Theorem. Don't you know anything?'

Fitz laughed. 'Lighten up. It's not the end of the world.'

Turlough shrugged. 'If you must know, my maths teacher was a retired Brigadier. Most of what I know of maths relates to ballistics, trajectories for mortar fire and armour penetration ratios. It's not really very useful.' He turned the shrug into an appeal, gesturing around the place. 'But neither is all this! Don't you see? You need to leave all this behind you. You need a proper job to give focus to your *day*, give you some direction in life.'

Fitz glanced sidelong at Turlough. 'Yeah, what is it you do again?' It was true. Nobody knew.

Turlough simmered silently at his tormentor, before switching back to Adric. 'Don't listen to him. He's a struggling musician.'

'Hey, I never struggle to be a musician. It's just a struggle making any money out of it.'

Adric waited.

'Yes, well anyway,' Turlough pressed on, 'the point is, you need a life. Outside of all this. Get out there and experience the world and leave the past behind you. You can still do all the maths in your spare time. Just keep it where it belongs – as a pastime. A hobby.'

Fitz nodded his full agreement. 'A hobby you never tell anyone about.'

'Yes, well,' conceded Turlough grudgingly, 'the musician does have a point there.'

'Not if you want any kind of social life,' Fitz affirmed with the authority of someone very much in the know. He paused only to glance at his watch, thinking that maybe *Baywatch* would help coax the boy out of his shell. 'Not if you want to win any favours with the ladies.'

Adric blushed. And huffed. 'What makes you think I want to win any favours with the ladies?'

Fitz's face brightened like a hundred watt light bulb had just gone off in each eye. 'Aha. Now we're getting somewhere.' He leaned in to aggravate Turlough with a nudge. 'The boy's in love.' Even Turlough's features, more at home with sneers and related

expressions, lit up. 'Now the only question is,' Fitz beamed slyly, 'which particular lady's favours does he want to win.'

'Well, I'm not telling you, if that's what you think.' Adric turned away, arms folded and resolute.

Fitz and Turlough looked at each other as though the decision of who got to play good cop and bad cop in the impending interrogation had already been made.

The area out the back of the TriBeCafé boasted none of the cheery brightness of the shop front, with its cosy lounge theme and pop culture décor, and Munster neglected to switch on the lights in each room as he shambled ahead of them, conducting them on a somewhat lethargic whistle-stop tour.

These were just the sort of dingy rooms and passages where Jo might expect to find a secret laboratory or a hidden alien base. She didn't like to be uncharitable or think ill of their employer – after all, he had just given them the jobs and issued them with a couple of rather pretty aprons – but still, some impressions were difficult to escape.

Munster grunted, stopping by one of the storerooms, just short of the cellar door. 'And here,' he grumbled, gesturing in through the doorway, 'is where we keep all the spares, the filters for the machines, all the bags of coffee.'

'Is it fair trade?' Jo wanted to know. Which caused Peri to look at her like she wanted to know why Jo wanted to know that.

'Fair trade?' Munster's laugh was like the rattle of stone chippings in a washing machine. 'Depends on your point of view. Forty tons of the finest Zolfa Thuran beans for a dozen of my prime battle drones - admittedly in a state of some disrepair.'

'So you are an alien!' declared Peri, with the air of a detective who had outfoxed her archnemesis in all his nefarious schemes and now had him cornered.

'I'd have thought that was patently obvious,' the alien said.

'And Munster's not your real name, at all,' deduced Jo. 'Is it?'

Munster snorted, impressed. 'You really were trained in British Intelligence.' He tried to raise a brow, but his facial folds weren't proving very co-operative. 'My real name is Colonel Gyrken. I am an officer of the Kraal Scientific Elite Corp. Retired.'

'A Kraal, huh?' Peri hmmphed. 'Can't say I've ever heard of you guys.'

'Careful Peri,' Jo grasped her arm, 'don't provoke him.'

'Can't say I'm surprised.' Gyrken scratched at the back of his head. 'We were never really big in this sector of the galaxy.'

'Until now, right?' Peri challenged him, daring him to reveal more of his plan, while she stole glances about her, searching for their best means of escape.

'I suppose,' said Jo meekly, 'this is the part where you pull a gun on us and explain the rest of your plot for world domination?'

At the risk of his face caving in altogether, Gyrken did his best to furrow his brow some more. 'Not really. I told you, I'm retired. I left all that behind me. Came here with the aim of settling down, adjusting to some sort of normal, everyday life. Running a coffee shop, that sort of thing.'

Jo and Peri traded looks.

'Munster' shrugged. 'Now, do you two want these jobs or not?'

'Um… okay,' said Jo.

'Sure,' said Peri, weakly. 'I could still use the money.'

'Good.' Gyrken favoured them with a contented growl. 'Just one thing,' he added as he was about to move off. The girls nodded as one. 'Never, on any account, go down into the cellar.'

'Um, why not?' ventured Jo courageously. 'What's down there?'

'Android production plant,' he explained. 'Lots of delicate equipment.'

The alien shuffled past and headed back to the café.

‘All right, all right!’ Adric threw up his hands in defeat. ‘If you must know, it’s Romana.’

That stumped both Turlough and Fitz. Reassured to a certain extent by that, Adric lowered his hands to his hips and planted them there with a measure of defiance. ‘So go on,’ he dared them, ‘have your jokes. Make fun of me.’

‘We wouldn’t do *that*,’ protested Turlough, stung by the very suggestion and his awkwardly placed emphasis. ‘What makes you think we would *do* that?’

‘No, no, wouldn’t dream of it,’ Fitz concurred earnestly. He regarded Adric anew, throwing in an impressed tip of the head. ‘This is serious business. Mind you,’ he cautioned, ‘if you want to attract a fine lady of Romana’s calibre, you might want to take a few important steps first.’

‘Ah, now this sort of thing Fitz does know about,’ warranted Turlough, trying to keep the worst of the green from his eyes.

‘All right,’ nodded Adric. ‘I’m listening.’

‘Well, your best bet is to take it slow,’ advised Fitz, all serious now. ‘Admire her from afar. Bide your time.’ Adric nodded again, taking it all in. ‘Reach puberty, that sort of thing.’

‘Oh ha ha! Very funny!’ Adric stormed past them. ‘That’s it, I’m not listening to you ever again!’

‘No, no. Come on, seriously.’

‘Yes, come on, Adric. You know what Fitz is *like*.’

Adric stopped at the door, hovering in moody indecision.

‘Look,’ offered Fitz. ‘There’s your outfit for starters. You could do with a change of clothes.’

‘He’s got a point,’ Turlough gestured at Adric’s attire. ‘That grubby yellow tunic really isn’t doing much for you.’

Adric inspected himself unhappily. ‘Well,’ he conceded, ‘it’s not the same without my gold star for mathematical excellence.’

‘Yeah, and you might want to cut down on the number of times you drop that into the conversation too, while you’re about it.’ Fitz landed a mock blow on Adric’s upper arm, to buck the lad up. ‘But don’t worry, me and Turlough can school you in the ways of the world, help you out with the makeover and, well, generally reverse the polarity of the whole Pygmalion thing.’

‘And all that other advice still stands,’ put in Turlough sagely. ‘All the more so if you want to impress a lady like Romana. So, it’s time to let go of all this, move on and get yourself a proper life.’

Adric chewed it all over, regarding each of them carefully as though to make sure they weren’t just winding him up some more. He nodded firmly, appearing to have come to a decision. ‘All right. I’ll do it. But – how do I let go? I mean,’ he glanced around at all the papers, the output of so many frenetic calculations, ‘even if I get rid of all this, it’ll still be there in my dreams.’

‘Ah, well maybe you can find some way to ease your conscience.’ Fitz raised his eyes to the ceiling, giving it some thought. ‘You know, when I’m feeling bad about a girl I – well, dumped, frankly,’ he confided, turning all avuncular so as to lend the confession some much-needed dignity, ‘I try to think about all the good things that came out of the relationship.’

‘And that makes you feel better?’ Turlough shook his head.

‘Yeah, pretty much. Most of the time.’

‘All right, so what good came of me wiping out the dinosaurs?’

Fitz returned his thoughts and eyes to Adric, remembering that this was about the boy. ‘Oh, that’s easy. There’s any number of ways that one act benefited Mankind. Gave the human race a kick-start, for one thing. The rise of mammals, all that.’

‘Yes,’ Turlough picked up the thread enthusiastically, ‘and then there’s the legacy of an entire class of giant reptiles that roamed the Earth, an age before Man that lives on in human memory since their discovery. It’s because of their extinction that they fire the imaginations of so many children. All the stories, the films. Godzilla. Jurassic Park. Barney.’ He’d run out of examples. ‘Uh, and all those fossil fuels, where would modern civilisation be without those?’

‘Yeah, and pollution.’

‘We’re supposed to be thinking of the good things.’

‘Yeah, yeah, sorry, Adric.’ Fitz smiled encouragingly. ‘What I meant was, there’s something you can do right there, something practical to make up for it.’

‘Yes!’ realised Turlough, like someone who’d just got Archimedes principle – *after* the first guy had jumped out of his bath and run naked down the street shouting ‘Eureka!’ ‘There you are, that’s it,’ Turlough nodded energetically, ‘that’s how you can make a real difference. Join an environmental group. Join Greenpeace.’

‘Yeah,’ echoed Fitz. ‘Cos, you know, Friends Of The Earth might be pushing it.’

Adric threw up his arms and glowered in the doorway. He stood there, his personal cloud darkening and looking ready to shoot forks of lightning. Unfortunately, if he was going to storm out with any impact at all, he was going to have to wait for Fitz and Turlough to unfold themselves from their current bout of laughter.

Romana was holding court from the comfort of her favourite armchair. The TriBeCafé was fairly quiet that late in the afternoon and they were safe to talk about pretty much anything they liked. While his two hired helpers were sitting down and socialising with their friends, the proprietor, Munster, was busy cleaning out the coffee machines and wondering whether it would be better to obtain some less technologically advanced models that his waitresses might have a better chance of understanding. Quite possibly the girls would not last very long in the jobs, especially if they downed towels too often in favour of mixing with the customers, but for now while there weren’t too many customers, the arrangement was a workable one. People in the Village could be so lazy.

At the moment, Romana was holding forth about her date, because they had all pressed her on the topic as soon as she’d made her appearance, although to be fair she was getting away with revealing very little.

So while everyone else was on the edge of their seat, listening attentively for any clue, Romana maintained her relaxed, secretive air

with only as much effort as it took to lounge well back in a comfy armchair. 'In any case,' she declared cheerfully, 'I don't think I'll be seeing him again for a while. He's not the steady type, always on the move, constantly changing. Never know when he's going to float back into your life.'

Fitz plucked a string or two of his guitar then twiddled with the tuning, before looking up. 'Sounds like someone I know.'

'What? You, you mean?' quipped Turlough.

'He means the Doctor,' Adric corrected him, perhaps having a fair amount of studying ahead of him in Fitz's and Turlough's course in Learning Not To Take Things Quite So Seriously. Still, on the plus side, Adric had made quite an impression on everybody when they had led him into the coffee shop, presenting him like a new sculpture to a stunned audience.

Clothes maketh not the man, but between them, like any good makeover team, they had taken surface appearances as their starting point. The dark leather jacket and cropped hair would no doubt take some getting used to, but Fitz and Turlough were confident that people would adjust to the stark transformation soon enough.

'Talking of the Doctor,' Romana continued, pitching it as a by-the-way variety of announcement, 'it's worth bearing in mind that, even if he's not actually around, you should all know, he'll always be there for you.'

'There's a song in that.' Fitz gave his guitar an experimental strum. 'Somewhere.'

'Yes, well, before we get carried away,' Turlough cut in before the strum could evolve into anything approximating the noises Fitz considered to be music, 'what's the situation with' – he jerked his head in the direction of Munster, over at the bar – 'the only ugly mug in the Village. Did we establish whether he was an alien menace or not?'

Everyone looked to Peri and Jo, perched on either arm of the sofa in their TriBeCafé–issue pretty aprons. 'Well, he is an alien. A Kraal,' said Jo.

'But he's not a menace,' said Peri.

‘So,’ Turlough really didn’t want to say the words, but some irresistible force had a hold of his powers of speech, ‘he’s an OK Kraal?’

The dangers of secondary smoke and a high-cholesterol diet were nothing to the looks he got from his friends.

‘All the guy’s doing,’ Peri pressed on courageously, ‘is producing a lot of good-looking androids.’

‘Yes, he’s not abducting anyone or replicating them or anything,’ Jo explained, in a way that suggested she thought it was all rather sweet really. ‘He’s just a bit self-conscious, you know, about his appearance, and he likes to be surrounded by beautiful people. Isn’t that the saddest story?’

‘It’s one of them,’ admitted Romana, with a roll of her eyes.

‘Aren’t the Kraal the saddest aliens, more like,’ was Fitz’s expert opinion.

‘One of them,’ admitted Romana again.

‘Well, they’re not all like that apparently,’ said Jo. ‘According to Munster, some of his people are really fairly dangerous.’

‘Mostly harmless,’ commented Turlough wryly. ‘So what do we do about it? We can’t have alien androids running amok in New York City. Can we?’

‘They’re only shopping amok,’ shrugged Peri. ‘And other normal-type stuff.’

‘What do *you* think, Romana?’ said Adric, leaning forward in the hope of basking a little in the glow of whatever she chose to say in response.

‘I’m more interested to know what you all think,’ countered Romana, her fingers dancing delicately on the end of the arm of her chair. ‘We’re all supposed to be here adjusting to everyday lives in the wake of our travels through time and space. Do we do battle with him or just hang out here and drink his coffee?’

Even Munster glanced up, perhaps overhearing and, if so, quite

probably interested to know the answer.

'Well, he's not doing any harm,' was Jo's vote.

'And he's kind of a nice guy when you get to know him,' said Peri.

'And now he's got a couple of hot, sexy waitresses working for him, he might cut back on his production of beautiful android people,' fielded Fitz. And he weathered the combined stares from Peri and Jo with a winning smile.

'Well, he is ugly,' said Turlough, 'but we can't hold that *against* **him.' And winced. He'd meant to lay all his emphasis on** *that.*

And that seemed to be that. Except Romana turned her gaze on Adric. 'Adric?'

'Really, it's, well, it's the Doctor's responsibility, isn't it? I mean, *if* **he wants to do something about it.' He shrugged. 'Besides, I don't know what you're asking me for.' He glanced sidelong at Turlough and then Fitz. 'I'm only the dinosaur guy.'**

Romana smiled. They all smiled. And Munster went back to cleaning his coffee machines. If he was relieved at all, there was no sign: his face wouldn't allow for anything like that loose an expression.

'Well,' pronounced Romana, sitting eagerly forward in her chair. 'Adric's a new man. We've solved the question of an alien presence in the Big Apple. And it's drawing in towards evening. I'd say this calls for a celebration.'

'A song?' offered Fitz optimistically. 'Although I'm not quite ready yet.'

'When did *that* **ever make a difference?' sniped Turlough.**

'I was thinking more along the lines of a party,' beamed Romana, and she jumped up from her chair. 'Come on, I know the perfect spot in the park.'

And Munster watched the whole group of them, waitresses and all, pile out of his coffee shop without so much as a by your leave. Beautiful people, all of them – except the boy, not so much, and the leather and cropped hair really wasn't working for him – but he didn't suppose

they'd ever do much more than acknowledge his presence. And drink his coffee. Not the likes of him. People in the Village could be so shallow.

So the whole group of them sojourned over to the park and in true party spirit, danced and frolicked around Romana's TARDIS. Which, since its materialisation in Manhattan, had assumed the guise of an ornamental fountain.

And when Fitz thought to ask Romana why, she answered, 'No particular reason. Just for fun.'

C ♦ O ♦ M ♦ P ♦ A ♦ N ♦ I ♦ O ♦ N ♦ S is not filmed before a live studio audience.

Significant Others

Blair Bidmead

‘Excuse me, my dear,’ said the old gentleman. ‘Do you mind if I sit here for a moment? It has been a very tiring day.’ The tavern was buzzing with activity and seating was scarce.

The young woman looked up from her phone. ‘No, of course not,’ she replied. ‘Are you OK?’

The old man leant wearily on his walking stick and eased himself onto the stool on the opposite side of the table. He plucked a handkerchief from the breast pocket of his black frockcoat and mopped his brow. ‘Just a little over-exertion, my dear,’ he replied. ‘I shall be perfectly fine after taking the weight off my feet for a short while. Good heavens, what a day! Hmmm?’

‘Tell me about it!’ said the woman. ‘Where were you when it was all kicking off?’

‘Hmmm?’ said the man, ‘'Kicking off?' Oh, I see what you mean! Yes! Well, I was over in the parliament building itself. Mediating, you might say. Yes, I was mediating between the Thymblym president and the ambassadors of Volstrox. Do you know, I think that I prevented the outbreak of interplanetary war!’

The woman noticed that the old gentleman's jacket was rather dusty. He had a smudge of soot on his nose. ‘You weren't inside when the parliament building exploded, were you!?’ she gasped.

The old man chuckled, wiping his face with his handkerchief. ‘Oh, it looked much worse than it was, my dear,’ he said. ‘It only damaged the east wing. No one was seriously hurt, I can assure you.’

‘Can I get you a drink?’ asked the woman. ‘My friend has just gone to the bar.’

‘No, thank you, my dear,’ said the man. ‘I am meeting some friends of my own here and then, I am afraid, we must be on our way.’ He looked at the young woman, only really noticing her properly for the

first time. She was blonde and dressed in jeans and a red T-shirt. 'I gather you, like myself, are not a resident of the planet Thymblym either, hmmm?'

'Nah, I'm just passing through,' said the woman. 'Helping out on the way. Me and my friend. We were with the local militia earlier; preventing those giant robot insects from reaching the fusion reactor.'

'Gracious!' said the old man, 'My dear young woman! You are lucky to be alive! So, it was you who stopped the insects? The Volstrox ambassadors couldn't understand why their robots had suddenly stopped working when they did. That would explain it. How did you stop them?'

'Well, my friend can be pretty persuasive when he wants to be,' said the woman. 'He had them eating out of the palm of his hand in the end. To be honest, that communications satellite exploding when it did couldn't have hurt. The robots were cut off from their communications.'

'Quite so,' said the man. 'Now, that was *my* friend who destroyed the satellite. He's a space pilot, you see. It was a contingency plan, in case the negotiations failed. It seems it was just as well, hmm?'

'And they've agreed to help all the refugees?' asked the woman.

'Oh, yes,' said the old man. 'I have another friend who was helping out at the refugee camp. She's passing on the good news to everyone now. The dawn of a new era of peace and prosperity between all the peoples of Volstrox and Thymblym. A happy day, wouldn't you say?'

'I'll drink to that,' said the woman. 'If he ever gets back with the drinks, that is.'

'There seems to be quite a queue at the bar,' said the old man.

'That never usually stops him,' said the woman. 'He's probably got distracted. It doesn't take much for him to do that. Are you sure you wouldn't like a drink? I'll phone my friend. Find out what's keeping him.'

The man considered. 'Perhaps a glass of water?' he said.

The young woman put her phone to her ear and tutted as the call

went straight through to voicemail. ‘It's me,’ she said. ‘Where are you? If you're still at the bar, can you bring a glass of water back with you too? I'm just chatting with this bloke. Hurry up will you?’ She cut the call.
‘'*Bloke*'?’ said the old man, arching his eyebrows. ‘My dear young woman, unless I am very much mistaken; it sounds to me that you may very well be from the planet Earth?’

‘I am,’ she said. ‘Is that where you're from?’

‘Well, in a round about sort of a way,’ said the man, with a dismissive wave. ‘Tell me, how do you come to be here, on the planet Thymblym in the fourth universe? Earth people have not yet reached this area of space, have they?’

The woman gave a weary smile. ‘It's a long story,’ she sighed. ‘I *am* from Earth. From London. The man I'm travelling with, he's from somewhere else. It's quite hard to explain. My name's Rose. Rose Tyler.’ She held out her hand and the old man shook it gently.

‘Enchanted, Miss Tyler,’ said the man. ‘So, this person with whom you are travelling is not human, you say? Is he Thymblymian? Or perhaps a Volstroxi?’

‘No,’ said Rose, ‘like I said, it's more complicated than that.’ She paused for a moment and looked at the old man. He glanced back at her with inquisitive eyes. There was something disconcerting in the stranger's gaze; unnerving in its familiarity.

‘I was abandoned here,’ said Rose, a touch of anger creeping into her tone. ‘I come from Earth, but it's an Earth in a different universe.’

‘Abandoned, you say?’ said the old man, scandalised. ‘Oh, my dear child. Who would do such a dreadful thing?’

‘Someone I trusted completely,’ said Rose. ‘He left me holding the baby. Sloped off without a word. Trapped me here just because he couldn't cope with the responsibility.’ She paused and furrowed her brow. ‘Why am I telling you all this?’

‘I am so sorry, my dear,’ said the man. ‘I did not mean to pry. I am afraid that I am insatiably curious by nature. Please, forgive me.’

‘No, no, it's fine,’ said Rose. ‘You're not prying. You're just making conversation. I don't know why I've started moaning on at you to be honest. We've just stopped an interplanetary war, haven't we? We should be celebrating!’

‘Indeed we should, Miss Tyler,’ the old man agreed.

‘Call me 'Rose',’ said Rose. ‘I'm sorry, I didn't ask your name...’

‘It's you!’ boomed a new voice, startling Rose and the old gentleman.

‘You took your time,’ said Rose to the newcomer.

‘Yeah, I had to get a round in for the whole militia,’ he replied, plonking down two pewter goblets, filled with a cloudy, white liqueur in front of Rose, and a glass of water in front of the old man.

‘I can't believe it's you,’ said the newcomer to the old gentleman. ‘How long has it been? A couple of eons at least!’

‘I beg your pardon?’ said the old man. ‘I think you are very much mistaken, sir.’

The newcomer was a tall, black man dressed entirely in white. His white hair was woven into neat cornrows and his broad smile was framed with a white goatee. He grabbed a vacant stool and joined them both at the table. ‘This is my friend I was telling you about,’ said Rose,’ This is Theo Possible. Theo, this is...’

‘We've already met, Rose,’ said Theo. ‘We studied together, back in the day.’

‘*'Studied'***?’ said the old man.**

‘Martial arts?’ said Theo, giving the table a gentle karate chop. ‘On Venus. You remember?’

‘*Venus***?’ said the old man, his memory beginning to clear.**

‘I had a big afro?’ said Theo, miming the size of his previous hairstyle. Rose laughed, took a sip of her drink and winced at the potency.

‘*Theo Possible***,’ stated the old gentleman, his face hardening at the**

recollection. 'The Ahequ Seminary on Venus! It's you!'

'The very same! So, how have you been?' said Theo. Then, noticing the walking stick in the old man's hand, he exclaimed; 'You've still got one of the old Venusian battle staves! That's great!'

The old gentleman levelled his gaze at Possible and lifted his stick. 'I sometimes need to walk with a stick,' he explained. 'I was never quite the same, after the injuries I sustained on Venus.'

Possible sipped his drink, 'I'm sorry to hear that,' he said. 'It is a contact sport, though, I suppose.'

'Theo,' said Rose, experimentally smacking her lips, 'what *is* this I'm drinking?' Possible took another swig of his own drink and swilled it around his mouth before swallowing. 'I can't remember what it's called,' he said. 'All the locals are drinking it. It's quite *frisky* isn't it?'

The old gentleman stared contemptuously at Possible. Theo shifted in his seat. Rose sensed the tension and attempted to calm the atmosphere. 'I was just explaining about us with the militia, Theo,' she said, 'The robot insects and everything.'

'Yes, what a nightmare,' said Possible. 'Busy day. What brings you to Thymblym?'

'I was brokering a peace treaty,' said the old man.

'Oh, that was you, was it?' said Possible. 'Great work. I was going to get to it straight after we saved the fusion reactor. Thanks for the back up. What are you up to these days? Still freelancing?'

'I am investigating the universe,' the old man replied.

'Nice,' said Theo. 'Do you see any of the old class? Noventa? And whassername, that nice technosapien lady...'

'I cannot recall,' said the man. 'My memory is not what it was. But then, of course, I didn't graduate did I? After my injury, hmmm? Although, I did go back to Venus for a funeral recently. I didn't meet anyone from the old school. But, never mind all that, Possible. What about you two, hmm? Miss Tyler, how did you and... this person... *meet*?'

‘Oh, it's not like that,’ said Rose, shaking her head vigorously.

‘No, no, no,’ said Theo, ‘The age difference is geochronological for a start. No, no, Rose is my *employee*. My personal assistant. It's all above board. We've signed contracts and everything.’

‘Yep,’ said Rose. ‘Remember, I was telling you about how I was abandoned here? Well, Theo helped me out. I've signed a temporary contract to work as his PA. I'm only working for him while we travel back to my own universe.’

‘You'd never believe what the last bloke she travelled with did to her,’ said Theo. ‘He only left her here, in the Fourth Universe, with some hideous, reject biological experiment. Can you believe it? He expected Rose to look after this awful thing he had created!’

‘The scoundrel!’ said the old gentleman. ‘What happened to this creature?’

‘Oh, he's moping about somewhere,’ said Rose. ‘Last time I saw him he was living in a cave, trying to fuel his homemade time machine with the power of self-pity alone. It's pathetic really.’ The old man narrowed his eyes. Something in Rose's last sentence had struck a nerve. She took a large swig from her goblet in order to wash down the painful memory. Theo sipped his drink innocently.

Over at the bar, the militia began a drunken, celebratory sing-song. The melody slowly spread across the tavern's patrons. Rose, Theo and the old gentlemen didn't know the words, but became caught up in the reverie and joined in with the hand claps and cheers. For a moment the tension was forgotten and they shared smiles with all of the celebrating locals.

Then, in the doorway of the tavern, a dashing young man and an elfin, teenaged girl appeared. They scanned the crowd, searching for a familiar face. Spying the couple, the old gentleman called out and waved. Spotting him, the pair waved back. ‘They're here,’ said the old man, climbing to his feet. ‘My friends, Steven and Vicki are just over there. I must bid the two of you farewell. Miss Tyler, it has been a pleasure. Do not let this Possible person give you any trouble, hmm?’

‘I won't,’ said Rose, shaking his hand. ‘Once bitten, twice shy.’

‘Possible,’ said the old man, pointing an accusatory finger at Theo. ‘You behave yourself, understand? You're not as clever as you think you are, you know. Or funny. You're not at all canonical! But, that said; you did good work today. So, for that I congratulate you. But, I must now bid you adieu.’ With a short bow, the old gentlemen turned swiftly and shuffled off through the crowd. He joined his friends in the doorway and left the tavern without a backward glance.

Rose felt a pang of déjà vu as he ducked through the doors and disappeared.

‘Well, that could have been a lot more embarrassing than it was,’ said Possible, draining his drink. ‘Your round, Tyler,’ he said, pushing his empty goblet towards Rose. Rose knocked back the last of her drink and stood up to head to the bar. ‘You're mate was an old charmer,’ she said, ‘What did he mean by, 'You're not canonical?'‘

‘Just a slip of the tongue’ said Theo. ‘He was always doing that. I think he meant to say 'comical'‘

‘Who was he anyway?’ said Rose.

‘Who indeed,’ said Possible.

Mapp, Lucia and the Lords of Time

Stuart Douglas

It is a common fallacy that time is experienced differently by species with widely varying lifespans. What is a decade to a man who might live a thousand years, the poets ask? Surely it is but a moment, its passing to be regretted as much as that of a raindrop landing in a raging torrent. Witless buffoonery, the Master might have commented as he faded from the view of his astonished guard, but by the time the thought had occurred Stangmoor Prison had already faded from view and the tedious months he had spent behind its walls had already been consigned to the unmourned past.

Instead, he found himself staring at the back of someone's head. A human female, if he was not mistaken, built on substantial lines and possessed of a loud and strident voice which she was evidently not hesitant to employ. She was busy on the telephone, fortunately, and so had not seen him sparkle into existence in her garden - but soon she would know all she needed to know of the Master.

He reached into his jet black tunic and slowly removed the equally dark Tissue Compression Eliminator he had retrieved from the Governor's office on the morning of his escape. One button on the base to arm it and another to fire, he smiled to himself as he raised the weapon and pointed it at the broad back he could see through the window before him...and then he stopped and lowered his arm as her words reached him.

'It is simply too much to bear, dear. She usurps me at every turn, spurning my friendly advances whenever she can. She undermines me and conspires against me, convincing even those who should be my closest allies to betray me.' There was the briefest moment of silence, before the flow of words began again, unabated. 'Exactly so! The perfect description. She is no better than the cuckoo in the nest, as you say. And so lacking in breeding.' Another pause followed, then, 'Mongrel is perhaps a trifle strong, though I would never condemn anyone for saying what they think. I can tell you, knowing your complete discretion, that I believe Emmeline Lucas to be the greatest blight on Tilling since the introduction of the governmental pension

encouraged idleness in the ordinary working person.'

The sound of a creaking gate brought the Master back to his senses, but before he could take any decisive action, the loquacious human placed the telephone receiver back in its cradle and disappeared from view.

'Pre-atomic age, certainly, but post-Industrial Revolution. Hmmm.' Conscious of his own conspicuousness in this primitive time, he slipped through the unlocked back door and took a seat at the kitchen table. He and the lady of the house had something in common, it seemed. Perhaps he might amuse himself a little before moving on.

'He just vanished into thin air, did he, Sergeant? I'll tell Geneva that, shall I?'

Brigadier Alistair Lethbridge-Stewart was in an extremely bad mood, which he was currently alleviating by bellowing at Sgt. Benton.

'Couldn't say, sir, but that's what the guard reckoned happened,' Benton answered stoically. 'Apparently, he'd been to see the Governor and when he came back he pulled some gizmo out of his pocket, pressed a button on it and just like that he was gone.'

'Presumably the guard couldn't be involved?' The laconic voice which emerged through the open doorway was quickly followed by its owner, that mysterious time traveller known as the Doctor. In this, his third incarnation, he was a tall, slim man with a shock of white hair and a face dominated by a nose which would have graced a Roman Emperor. He wore a suit of light purple corduroy over a frilled white shirt, with black elastic sided boots and flowing cape completing the eccentric ensemble.

'The guard?' snapped the Brigadier. 'Talk sense, Doctor. His career is over because of this. He'll be fortunate not to face charges, so no, I do not think it likely he was involved.'

The Doctor was unperturbed. 'Just trying to help, old chap, no need to bite me face off.' He pulled a narrow roll of paper from his pocket. 'Then these readings I took on the way over here are correct. Somehow the Master has managed to construct a rudimentary time machine from the bits and pieces in here.' He shook his head in grudging admiration. 'There's really no denying the fella's genius. Still,' he

continued more happily, ‘he can't have gone far. There's a definite tracery of Artron energy heading from Strangmoor into the past, but not enough to have transported him more than a few hundred miles geographically. He's probably still in England, in fact. He shouldn't be too hard to find.’

The Brigadier thought he'd identified a flaw in the Doctor’s confident assertions. ‘But your TARDIS is still out of commission, isn't it, Doctor?’

The Doctor frowned. Reminders of his current exile on Earth in the 1970s were never welcome. ‘True, Brigadier, very true. But in this case I don't need to know the dematerialisation codes. I'll just hitch the TARDIS to the Artron trace and use that to piggyback my way into the past.’

‘A tow, you mean?’ Benton asked with a grin. ‘Like a rusty old caravan?’

The Doctor, however, pretended not to have heard. He stalked past the two men, out of the room. Moments later, they heard the sound of Bessie, the Doctor’s Edwardian roadster, starting up and roaring away.

For several regenerations, the Master had wondered what the Doctor found so fascinating about humanity. Between their infinitesimal lifespans, under-developed minds and lack of physical protection, they were, at best, suitable for use as slaves or pets - and yet the Doctor seemed, at times, to think of them as equals!

Now, though, as he poured himself tea from the still warm pot on the kitchen table and considered the woman’s description of her enemy, he recognised a third way of looking at the species. He had once spent a tiresome week imprisoned in the Boulevard of Alternate Brutalities alongside a Slitheen miniscope operator, and though he had eventually been forced to steal her spare flesh suit in order to escape, she had first described her menagerie of captives in fond detail. It was this which came to mind now; aliens as entertainment, animals performing to amuse a knowing audience. Perhaps this explained the Doctor’s interest in humanity? Perhaps he too appreciated a good, old-fashioned circus?

Take his current host for example. Viewed as an individual example of a sentient species, she was almost entirely without interest. Her physical form was unappealing and her mind pedestrian, her views undoubtedly narrow and restrictive, her opinions and beliefs certainly devoid of merit. He should kill her the second she stepped back into the room, he absolutely should. He fingered the slim weapon in his pocket with a small groan of anticipation. A Tissue Compression Eliminator did exactly what it claimed, which was one of the reasons he liked it. It compressed, then eliminated all tissue, turning any target into a small, plastic mannequin, which could then easily be disposed of. It would be the work of a moment to create a chunky new doll.

But there was something about the conversation he had overheard, an unexpected sensation of common purpose, which stayed his hand. Odd though it was, he knew what it was to feel as she did. The humiliation of defeat at the hands of a lesser intellect was a familiar tale. He would spare her for that fellow feeling, if nothing else. And besides, he had nothing else with which to amuse himself while he considered a means of permanent escape from this fetid backwater. Why not help ruin the lives of her enemies while he waited? So long as she did not become annoying, of course.

Any further musings on the subject would need to be put on hold, however, for at that moment the woman returned, carrying a parcel in her hand.

'How do you do?' he murmured with a reassuring smile. 'I let myself in. I do hope you don't mind.'

Georgie thought it vile, and the Padre was moved sufficiently to describe it, in his most Scotch tone, as a 'muckle carbuncle' but Lucia - the most forward looking member of Tilling society (had she not introduced them all to Stravinsky the previous month?) - declared it just the thing and wondered loudly why the village had never had one installed before.

'Because it is so ugly, my dear,' said Georgie, squinting wildly in the bright sunlight, but still contriving somehow to make it clear that he was simultaneously and primarily frowning with displeasure.

'We've never felt the need, lassie,' the Padre added with more passion than he had shown that Sunday when sermonising on the

Hitties and their descent from Canaan, son of Ham. ‘Crime is nae concern of ours, and so we have nae need for a Police box. It’s nae more complicated than thon!’

The object of their discussions stood before them at the junction of Porpoise Street and West Street, tall, blue and rectangular, with a light on top and a little hatch in front, behind which lay a telephone of clever and unusual design. It's purpose was clear, for the words POLICE CALL BOX were painted above a set of two blue doors, and it was this which had caused the Padre, who had seen it first when taking his morning constitutional around the village, to rush round to Mallards. Lucia had been to London several times, after all, and had once been fined twenty shillings for dangerous bicycling.

‘It's just the thing,’ Lucia declared again. She walked round it clockwise, then reversed her steps, examining it from every possible angle. She even stood on tip-toe at one point, and attempted to see through the small, square windows which adorned its upper sections, but either they were blacked out or filthy (‘security’, Georgie offered gnomically), and she could make out nothing of the interior. ‘What Tilling has been missing, Padre, is an Official Presence. Why, before this invaluable box arrived, what protection had we from Bolsheviks and Germans and what have you? Shall I tell you? None at all.’

‘Less than, some days,’ Georgie added unhelpfully.

He might have gone on to say more, even less helpfully, had the door to the mysterious Police box not chosen that moment to swing open.

‘Good afternoon,’ said the brilliantly attired figure who stepped out in the sunshine. ‘I am the Doctor. I don't suppose you've seen a sinister looking chap with a beard round here recently?’

At that instant, how Georgie wished he had never succumbed to personal vanity and cultivated the Van Dyke which currently added gravitas to his face. So unlike him, too, but he had been swayed by Lucia, as usual. In sudden terror that he might turn out to be the sinister chap alluded to, he forced a cough and left his hand casually resting against his mouth, praying that he had not overlooked some terrible infraction in his past.

Happily, however, the Padre - who had been mulling over the

question of Bolsheviks the whole time - had had a thought which so excited him that he entirely forgot his Scotchness in his rush to express it. 'Bless me, you know who he means, don't you? The fellow Marx!'

Georgie was the first to admit that he was not exactly au fait with continental politics, but he was pleased to discover that he knew the name. 'This chap Marx, he writes for the Bolsheviks, if I remember right,' he said. He beamed across at the wonderfully erect stranger, who politely returned the smile but said nothing further.

The Padre, however, was intrigued by this new side to Georgie's character. 'Can't say I know, really. Just saw the fellow's picture in the Telegraph. Writes, does he? What sort of thing, do you know?'

Georgie, who did not know, had no intention of admitting that in front of the suave newcomer. 'Oh, banners and placards, I believe,' he said in what he hoped was a suitably scholarly tone, 'DOWN WITH THE GOVERNMENT and SHORTER HOURS FOR GREENGROCERS, that sort of thing. Though,' he concluded, for he had no desire to deceive anyone, 'it may be that I am mis-remembering who does the actual writing. It may be that this Marx merely paints the banners and placards, and someone else comes up with the words.'

'Oh, Georgie, you do know so much, mia cara,' trilled Lucia, while keeping the corner of one eye reserved for the stranger. He was, she supposed, a Policeman, though one neither in uniform nor, in strict honesty, plain clothes, which made him a genuine subject of interest. He had the look of one of Irene's friends, in fact, so possibly was involved in tracking down a team of international art thieves. Lucia could easily picture herself assisting the Police with so thrilling an enquiry. Had she not exhibited for several years in succession at the Tilling art festival *and* been the subject of a Mayoral painting which had almost been hung in Chambers? She had barely begun musing on the possibility of unmasking a forger at his nefarious craft, however, when the policeman rudely spoke up.

'Really, this is intolerable,' he barked. 'Madam,' he went on, addressing Lucia in what she considered a most over-bearing and peremptory manner, 'can you direct me to the nearest Police station? I suspect they will be able to assist me. No?' he concluded, before anyone had a chance to speak. 'Very well then.'

And he would have left them standing there had not Lucia, sensing further stirrings of something intensely interesting which might yet lead to new clippings for Georgie's record of her public life, taken steps to stop him. 'A bearded gentleman, you say? Why yes, we would be delighted to help. I am the Mayor, as you no doubt already know. As such, I have the resources of Tilling council at my fingertips.

'But won't you take some refreshment before we begin? My own humble pied-a-terre lies but a stone's throw away, and I would be delighted to further make your acquaintance.'

'As would I,' Georgie agreed hurriedly, with a far-away look in his eyes.

The Padre, who had a sermon to write and two elderly parishioners to visit, reluctantly admitted that he had best be about his business. He wondered if he might convince his wee wifie to take his place but before he could suggest such a thing – and also, he considered uncharitably, before the stranger could utter a word of refusal – the others had bustled the puir man along the lane in the direction of Mallards, leaving him standing alone in the lane.

To Elizabeth Mapp's surprise, the mysterious figure in her kitchen had neither robbed her at gunpoint nor kidnapped her and sold her into white slavery as the concubine of a dark-skinned Maharajah. Instead, he had explained that he had been passing the house and had so admired it that he had thought to pop in and commend the owner. 'And finding no answer at the front, I wandered round to the back, where the door lay open. I thought I heard you speak – evidently to the delivery boy and not, as I thought, to me – and came inside, where you so recently discovered me examining your antique milk jugs!'

Put like that, the intrusion was rather a flattering one. Even more so when viewed in the round, as it were. Mr Masters (for so he had introduced himself with a courtly bow and the flutter of dusky lips on porcelain skin) was a striking looking man, by any measure. Of good height, with a slightly olive complexion, he wore a beard in the style of Drake and Raleigh, which gave him an appealingly raffish look, she thought.

He certainly knew how to put a lady at her ease. They had been speaking together for – she glanced at the clock – over an hour, during

which time he had listened intently to her views on many of the more important subjects of the day and never once allowed his attention to flag. Even the Major occasionally closed his eyes during one of their talks. He could (and would in future) take a leaf out of Mr Masters' book, she decided with a snort, which unfortunately Mr Masters noticed.

'Are you quite well, Miss Mapp?' he asked so solicitously that she feared he might weep, and rushed to reassure him.

'Very well, thank you, Mr Masters. I simply burn to think of the perfidy of that woman I mentioned to you earlier.'

Now that she considered it, it was a trifle out of character for her to speak so freely of her rivalry with Lucia, especially with a man who was, no matter how you viewed it, a stranger. Which just goes to show that some people are naturally *simpatico***, she concluded with satisfaction.**

'Mrs Lucas.'

Mr Masters' voice was flat and cold and disapproving, much to Miss Mapp's delight. Finally, someone who understood the burden under which she laboured.

'The very same, Mr Masters. An interloper, no less, of limited intellect and duplicitous character, who has nonetheless so gulled my neighbours and so-called friends that she all but styles herself Queen of Tilling. *All but***, did I say? Ha! She is the** *Mayor***, you know!'**

The bark which emanated from her throat was loud and harsh, like an elderly sea lion who was also a heavy smoker begging for a scrap of fish, though the comparison was not one which would have occurred to the lady herself. She rose from the table and crossed to a dresser, from which she removed a sheet of paper. She pushed it towards Mr Masters.

'What do you make of that, Mr Masters?' she asked then, without pause for a reply, read aloud the words printed on the sheet.

GALA DAY!

A HISTORY OF ENGLAND THE GALLANT!

STARRING MRS EMMELINE LUCAS, MAYOR

AS QUEEN ELIZABETH

‘It’s no more than a re-staging of some tatty fete from the last village she polluted with her presence, of course, but even so the lickspittles and lackies can’t wait to herald the new Queen! How I wish she had never shown her unpleasant face in Tilling!’

It really was enormously freeing to say all these perfectly understandable little thoughts out loud, Elizabeth decided. Why had she never thought to do so before? Mr Masters certainly appeared to appreciate the confidences, for he was smiling at her in a most confusing manner.

‘Would you like me to arrange that for you, my dear Miss Mapp?’ he asked.

Such was Elizabeth’s surprise that her womanly fancies had been taken seriously that it was all she could do to ask what exactly he had in mind.

‘Ah, mio Dottore, come, sit by me.’

Lucia patted the stool at her side and beamed encouragingly at her guest, casting a subtle glance in Georgie's direction as she did so. If truth be told, before extending the invitation she had worried, just a little, that Georgie would react poorly, and possibly even view the rather dashing Doctor as a rival for her love and affection. He could be such a tiger when roused, after all (she had been told that Evans, the professional at Georgie's croquet club, still bore a scar on his ankle, inflicted by the dear boy's impetuously discarded mallet). To her delight however, Georgie remained every inch the gentleman, and if his heart fluttered at the sight of the Doctor usurping his place, he allowed no sign of his inner turmoil to show on his boyish visage. Indeed, he stared at the tall, white haired intruder with a sort of glassy eyed reverence which, combined with his slightly open mouth, reminded Lucia of a stuffed pike she had once encountered in a country inn outside Littlehampton.

As it happened, Georgie need not have feared for his place, in any case. For, far from rushing to her side as Lucia had idly allowed herself to imagine, the Doctor snapped, ‘Really, Madam, do pay

attention. As I explained to you before you dragged me into yet another of your ludicrous rooms, we face a danger greater than any this world has ever known. We must find the Master!'

Georgie murmured something which she did not quite catch (it might have been 'so masterful' but she could not be sure), and she felt her cheeks burn with shame at being so rudely addressed. Still, nobody could accuse Lucia of placing personal feeling before the general good.

Except Elizabeth Mapp, of course! She was exactly the sort to suggest exactly such a calumny! If raw experience had not taught Lucia that fact, then a single look at her ill-humoured face would have done so. A woman of meagre talents, she had often thought, made lunatic by envy and jealousy. Or were envy and jealousy the same thing? She would check later, once the Doctor...oh yes, the Doctor. Now, what has he been saying?

Lucia flushed again.

'Forgive me, Doctor. My mind wanders so when a smidgen of Mozartino beckons!' She laughed gaily, but the Doctor simply *glared* **at her, and she wondered if he were really so dashing after all. Did his white hair not make him look a trifle** *old***? 'You were saying?' she prompted, but with much of the warmth gone from her voice.**

'Hmm, very well,' her guest said, but she could see he was distracted. 'I was saying that we urgently need to discover what the Master up to!'

'How exciting! Count me in!'

Georgie perked up quite wonderfully if given time to do so, Lucia always thought. She recalled the time he'd wandered into the wrong building entirely in Monte Carlo and ended up spending a night locked inside a Whaling Museum rather than the amusingly themed casino he had expected. Within half an hour of being released next morning, however, he was drinking champagne and dancing a jig at the dockside. There was a word for it in Italian, she was sure, but she could not, for the present, bring it to mind.

'And I!' she chimed in, determined not to be left out of whatever *diversione* **the Doctor had planned. 'But how shall you find out? You can hardly walk up and ask him!'**

Unexpectedly, he did not join in the laugh which followed this small sally. 'Of course not,' he positively snapped. 'He'd spot me in a second and be off again in an instant. Goodness knows when he'd end up this time!'

Could the Doctor be a trifle *slow*? Was he, perhaps, not quite quick enough to grasp the swift quips she often shared with dear, sweet Georgie? She attempted to exchange a fleeting glance with her oldest *confidante* and beloved husband, intending thus wordlessly to transmit her concerns to him, but he was too busy staring up the Doctor's aquiline nose to notice. Really, was she to be treated like the boy who once did the Major's boots by every man with whom she met today?

Ignored by her friend, she turned to her guest, but he too was lost in introspection. I might as well be a pot plant for all the attention I receive, she thought, and played a moody run from the *Moonlight Sonata* on the piano.

The familiar notes were enough to break Georgie's concentration, at least. With a start, he allowed his hand to drop from his face and addressed the Doctor as though Lucia had inexplicably popped into the garden and left the two men alone together.

'You know,' he said, with what he felt sure was an insouciant smile, 'I'm sure that I could get close to this Master chap and, what's the word, *grill* him, just like a character in one of those threepenny novels Foljambe is so keen on. Discover his plan and whatnot, and then report back to you, Doctor.'

Lucia wondered if he wasn't coming down with something. Georgie had many fine qualities but the art of embroidery had until today tended to trump that of war, for all his tigerish nature on the croquet lawn. Yet here he was, offering to infiltrate the enemy camp no less. It was all very confusing.

If put to it, Georgie would have been forced to agree. It *was* confusing. He'd certainly had no intention of volunteering to spy on what sounded a grubby little man. But there he was, offering to *grill* him, no less. It reminded him of the time at school when he'd suddenly found himself considering climbing the Quad Tower just as Captain Hopkinson, the rather dashing Science master, had walked past. Only the lack of suitable shoes had stopped him that time, but now...well, he

was all but out of the door before he had a chance to think.

He paused in the threshold for a heartbeat, then with a wave was gone, only to return a minute later to snatch up a scarf and hat and a set of medicinal dark glasses he'd had made up during that terrible hot summer of headaches, the year before they'd left Riseholme. 'My disguise,' he announced to the room in general, then swept away once more, closing the front door quite firmly behind himself.

'Why, I shall simply kill her, of course.'

Elizabeth experienced a most unexpected thrill as Masters spoke. A genuine assassin! How Lucia would shrivel with envy when she heard. Or rather wouldn't, she considered with displeasure. Even if her new friend were willing to read out a statement to Lucia before carrying out the deed, her understanding of her fate, and the party behind it, would be over within a handful of moments. That was rather the point with an assassination, of course. The sudden end, then the eternity of peace. Well that would never do.

'Kill her?' she frowned. 'Kill Lucia? No, no, Mr Masters, you go too far. Removed, I said, not killed!'

To her satisfaction, he grasped the subtle distinction at once. 'Forgive me, dear lady. In my desire to repay your kind hospitality, I have over-stepped myself. Please allow me to suggest an alternative solution.'

One would hardly believe he was a continental, so refined were his manners. Ever since he had materialised from thin air at her kitchen table, drinking her tea and admiring her collection of antique milk jugs, he had acted the perfect gentleman. Elizabeth had briefly considered asking if there were any trace of England in his ancestry, but had dismissed the thought as likely to cause the poor man embarrassment, should he be forced to reply in the negative. In many ways, she allowed charitably, it was not the fault of foreigners that they were not English, and it behoved those who were to exercise a degree of tact.

All of this cogitation took some time. When she refocused her attention on Masters, however, she found him still patiently awaiting her permission to continue. Surely, there was a smidgen of English

blood in his veins.

'Do go on, Mr Masters,' she said finally, but with a small smile playing about her lips, reassuring the dear man that she was not offended by his initial suggestion. Such things meant a great deal to the Latin temperament, she had once read in a Times' piece on the Borgia family.

'Thank you,' Masters replied, with a very becoming, but in no way servile, bow. 'My plan is a simple one. You wish to be removed of Mrs Emmeline Lucas, currently resident at Mallards in the centre of the village? Quite so. How would it be if I could so arrange matters that Mrs Lucas was never a resident of that home - or any other in Tilling?'

There it was; the inevitable difficulty with the subtleties of a second language. 'Never?' queried Eliabeth, but kindly, for did they not say that English was the most difficult language to learn (though she herself, she had been assured, had been fluent even as a very small child). 'I think you mean no longer?'

'No, my dear Miss Mapp, I mean never.' He rested his forefinger against his lip and tilted his head slightly, and stood thus for half a minute at least. Finally, a decision obviously reached, he spoke again. 'Look at me, Elizabeth Mapp,' he whispered dramatically. 'Look into my eyes!'

Elizabeth did not entirely care for this turn of events. It reminded her of the time that the Major - considerably the worse for wear after a drunken regimental reunion – had presented himself at her door with a rose in his teeth and, apparently, passion in his soul. Unfortunately for the Major, the rose prevented him opening his mouth properly, so that all she had heard was the curious fact that he had a patch in some rissoles, before he stumbled against the door-frame and bit down on the rose stem, inflicting a nasty cut on his upper lip.

Of course, she had refused him access to her unguents and that had been enough to send him staggering off into the night, but she doubted a similar ruse would work with Mr Masters. Still, one must try…

'I shall do no such thing, Mr Masters! I am sure I have given you no reason to confuse me with…well, with whatever sort of loose woman you have in your own land, but I will not be ordered to look into any

man's eyes, I can assure you!'

At once, she could see that her words had hit home. Masters was crushed, bowing his head in shame, his hands held out in supplication before him.

'Can you find it in your magnificent heart to forgive me once again, my dear Miss Mapp? If I have moved beyond the bounds set by polite society, I can only plead your splendid qualities for my digression. Your…'

Here words failed the eager lover. His mouth opened and closed, but silently, as though he had so many words within him that he could not pick the best. Elizabeth felt herself unbend a little as she watched this bashful performance. She would relent, she decided.

'Enough now, Mr Masters. Let us speak of it no more.'

She glanced up at him as she spoke, eager to view the effect her own munificence had had upon him. Had his eyes always sparkled so? She leaned in closer, suddenly terribly warm, as his soft voice explained all manner of implausible things…

The Master rather liked the 16th century. It was dirty, it was true, and smelled abominable, but you could kill someone in the middle of the street and nobody was likely to chase you, not least for fear of slipping in the waste which covered every available surface and then dying of an infected toenail.

Finding Drake had also proven far easier than it would have in other centuries. Five minutes asking after him from random passers-by had brought him to the door of a noisy inn, from within which the sounds of revelry could be heard. Two minutes later he was running back out with a plastic Drake figure in his hand, and a crowd of the dead man's friends at his heels.

He tossed the little mannequin on a nearby brazier to the astonishment of a group of loafing idlers, turned a corner and pressed the return switch on his time watch. Behind him, a hastily convened mob shuddered to a halt and fell to its collective knees, crossing themselves wildly. Killing a man in an inn might be as a good as a national sport, but only witches burned their tiny familiars then disappeared into thin air.

After a minute, every man dusted himself down and rose to his feet, glancing at his neighbour with the same thought in his head. This particular powerful sorcerer with his black wand of death might have escaped, but there were equally evil, equally powerful forces of darkness they could combat, now their dander was basically up.

Elderly, unmarried women with an interest in herbology were in for a bad night.

The Doctor was rapidly coming to the decision that his entire morning was turning out to be time wasted. He was still at a loss to explain why he had allowed himself to be chivvied into taking tea with Lucia, but there was no denying she had turned politeness into a weapon which it was difficult to ignore. As she batted his every attempt to leave to one side with a terrifying courtesy, he was put in mind of a Draconian Prince he had once known. Even now, with Lucia in another room searching for her 'little sketch pad', with which he might, as she put it, 'attempt a likeness of the villain', he felt himself pinned by her never-ending voice, and unable to make his excuses and leave.

'...una Paloma blanco. But of course you already know that, I'm sure.'

For the briefest of moments, the Doctor could have sworn that Lucia's bad Italian had turned into fluent Spanish, but as quickly it was gone as the TARDIS' translation circuits picked up on the change and moved everything into the English it expected to hear. Which was odd in itself, as the old girl was usually subtle enough to spot instants of quotation and pretension and leave them in their original tongue. Odder still though was the fact that, with concentration, the Doctor could overcome the translation layer and faintly make out echoes of the actual words being spoken - and those words were entirely in Spanish.

Something was certainly amiss - of course it was, with that idiot Master running about - but it was impossible to broach the subject with Lucia, for obvious reasons.

He considered shouting through that he had to pop out on an errand, but it seemed awfully rude, somehow, and by the time he had decided that yes, a general nosey around might be helpful, the outer

door opened behind him and the most splendidly attired grandee entered the garden-room and stood, clearly non-plussed, in front of him.

From top to toe, the newcomer was adorned in capes and frills and plumes, every element in one shade or other of the most glorious scarlet. Boots of a similar hue, with silver buckles and, yes, tiny bells provided a stylish platform for this sartorial vision, while at the very peak, a tall, soft hat adorned with a single long feather cast his face in artful shade and completed the ensemble. The Doctor had never seen a man so well dressed, like some wonderful human peacock.

'My dear fellow,' he said, rising to his feet and flicking his cape to the floor, lest this master of apparel see his own meagre attempts at style and be embarrassed on his behalf. He thrust out a hand and, after a long pause for consideration, was gratified to have it limply shaken.

'My name is the Doctor,' he said with a tiny bow. 'Delighted to meet you, Mister...'

He left the sentence hanging but was never to know if the newcomer would have supplied his own name, for Lucia chose that moment to return.

'Georgie!'

'Lucia!'

Georgie? The same Georgie Pilsbury who had so recently left to spy on the Master? Surely not. And yet, now that he took a closer look at the features rather than the clothes, he could see the resemblance. There was the beard, for one thing. But this man was bronzed and, as established, dressed in splendour such as would not disgrace the Pharaohs, whereas the other had favoured bow ties and checked trousers. He turned to say this to Lucia – and to ask why she was acting as though they had not been together only ten minutes previously - but she too had undergone a metamorphosis, seemingly between one room and the next. A reasonably elegant woman already, she had also cleverly darkened her skin in a heartbeat and now more closely resembled a European actress on display than an English lady of a certain class. Sophia Loren, perhaps - or was it Audrey Hepburn? Whoever it was, the change was undeniable.

‘Pleased to see you again, Mr Pilsbury, I'm sure,’ he said finally, aware that he was allowing an uncomfortable silence to develop.

‘Mister?’ Lucia laughed gaily as she swept into the room. ‘How would your grandfather react to that, dearest Georgie?’ She rested her eyes briefly on the Doctor. ‘It’s Don Georgie Pilsbury, of course. Dear Georgie’s grandfather was ennobled for his services during the conquest of Wales in the 1860s.’

‘For supplying tapas and assorted relishes to the third Anglo-Spanish army throughout the Abergavenny Campaign, to be exact,’ Georgie offered modestly. ‘The King of Tortillas they called Grandpapa.’

‘The conquest of Wales...?’

‘Exactly!’ exclaimed Georgie. He lowered her voice conspiratorially, as though there were more than just the three of them in the room. ‘Not that he was a tradesman by then, you understand. He'd already made his fortune in the Scotch War and virtually gave away his condiments in the Welsh fighting. Even so, the republican newspapers did insist on referring to him as the Fascist Greengrocer. Quite tarsome, between you, me and King Carlos.’

‘The Scotch newspapers still do, don’t they, Georgie?’ added Lucia sympathetically.

Don Georgie nodded sadly. ‘So like those terrible savages. What was it Cervantes said about the Scotch? A nation of Shakespearean Fools, part comic but mainly tragic, wasn’t it? Or was that the Irish? Anyway, a tarsome, tarsome people who don’t deserve to join the Empire, even if they should beg. Which,’ he concluded, for in all realities Georgie Pilsbury was a fair man, ‘they don’t actually seem all that keen to do in any case.’

The conversation had gotten away from the Doctor a little, he realised. ‘The Empire?’ he asked, in an effort to return it to a more useful tack. ‘The British Empire, you mean?’

The others looked at him in obvious confusion and, he was surprised to see, some fear.

‘The Greater Spanish Empire, naturally!’ Lucia said loudly.

‘I must say - Doctor, was it? - I find your joke in rather poor taste. British Empire, indeed! Don't let Major-General Flint of the Guardia Civil hear you say that. It'll be the tiger gun for you if he does.’ He shivered theatrically. ‘That old booze hound brings me out in the collywobbles, I don't mind admitting, and me a Knight of Saint Sebastian, with a sword and everything.’

His hand fell to his side to demonstrate but he'd left his sword in the umbrella stand in Mallards Cottage and so there was nothing there. Panicking, and in a paroxysm of embarrassment, he attempted to give the impression that he had a terribly itchy thigh then quickly drew up as he realised that scratching in front of a lady was hardly the done thing. Converting the scratch to a stroke, he fingered the velvet of his cape lining, then lost all interest in the Doctor as he savoured the luxurious feel of the soft fabric on his fingers. It really was the most lovely piece of material...

From the others’ point of view, Georgie had turned a darker shade of auburn, his eyes had gone glassy and he had first waved at, then prodded, and finally caressed his own leg and was now staring, slack jawed, at a point a foot above Lucia’s head.

The Doctor, though, had no time to waste. Abandoning Georgie as a hopeless case, and possible mental defective, he appealed to Lucia for information. ‘Mi- señora Lucas, what can you tell me of English history?’

Whether English, Italian or Spanish, Lucia was, at her core, always Lucia, and this request from a dashing stranger for education was she felt, exactly the sort of thing she had been placed on this earth to provide. And could the timing be more perfect, just when her already comprehensive knowledge of the subject had so recently been polished in preparation for the upcoming Pageant? She even had the ideal book...

‘Carino Georgie, could you pass me that volume of Presidente Moseley’s Thoughts on Historical Perspective that I have been so devoted to recently. It's sitting on top of the cabinet behind you. I shall use that to refresh my memory on the more intricate details.’

Georgie, jolted from a peculiar daydream of sword fighting bare chested against a rather ferocious Republican prisoner he had seen

breaking rocks in the High Street earlier, reached behind him for the book, although the only use he could recall Lucia putting it to had been to stand on it when she couldn't quite reach the top shelf of her spice rack.

'There you are,' he said, distractedly, and returned to his earlier thoughts, with what he considered a playful but cruel smile on his lips.

Lucia, meanwhile, dropped the book into her lap and, removing the bookmark from page seven where it had been strangely misplaced, flicked it open in the middle. 'Now, dear Doctor, what would you like to know?'

For the next half hour, through a combination of Lucia furtively consulting the index and quoting chapter titles as those they were statements of her own, the Doctor gained an insight into an England utterly transformed by the Master's actions.

'You must understand,' Lucia began, 'that the *Triumph of the Armada* **led to the...to the...let me see, now what is the proper term? You would not thank me for a layman's explanation, Doctor, I know, though perhaps it would easier for you to gras...no wait, I have it,** *The Absorption of the Crown***. Of course! It's all coming back to me now! And then** *The Execution of Elizabeth* **was followed by...' She paused to draw the Doctor's attention to the attractive way the sun was striking the whitewashed wall behind him then, having rested her weary eyes briefly on the index, which happened to be open, went on, 'was followed by** *The Adulation of Philip* **and** *The Rise of the Anglo-Spanish Nobility***.'**

Knowledge once learned never left you, she was pleased to note. It was unfortunate, therefore, that she was unaware that Presidente Moseley was a man best known for his idiosyncratic views on racial segregation and their role in English history.

'And of course, we should not forget *The Problem Of the Mongrel Races* **and** *s***...'**

There was something bothering the Doctor, she was certain, but before she could ascertain what exactly it was, he indicated with a frown that he had heard enough. He pushed himself to his feet. 'There's something not right here, senora - though I suspect you've no

way of knowing that,' he declared. 'This isn't the same village as before, that's for sure.' Seeing the puzzled look on her face, he continued, 'It's a Time Lord gift,' which only confused her further since she hadn't asked and it hardly seemed necessary to claim a special gift to be able to identify that the village had changed over the years. Unless he was referring to her efforts to modernise Tilling during her time as Castellan?

'It is so kind of you to notice, Doctor. It is difficult to bring the peasantry round to the modern way of thinking, but I have done what little I can,' she explained. 'There are the new steps at the Iberian Tower, of course, and the bull fighting ring has been re-rolled several times. And you might want to mention to your superiors that the wall used for public executions is scrubbed down weekly and painted every…'

But the Doctor was already on his way out of the door, and heard nothing more.

The Master, meanwhile, had materialised back at Grebe and had just had a first glimpse of the new world he had created.

An updated Elizabeth Mapp stood revealed in the kitchen doorway in all her lumpen glory. A dense tangle of tight auburn curls topped a face almost a compressed oval in shape and a pale walnut in colour. An inch of rolled neck slumped into a lacy white collar which, in turn, marked the summit of a mountain of heavy brown velvet arranged in overlapping, ever widening layers. The effect, the Master considered, was that of a Christmas tree which had shed all its needles and had them replaced with chocolate cake. He grinned with delight.

'My dear Miss Mapp, you look magnificent!' he exclaimed as she flicked open a paper fan (on which was displayed a rather idealised image of the famed Anglo-Spanish matador Tom Finney) and invited him to sit and have a drink of Sangria.

As he did so, he took the opportunity to take in the room, which was much changed since he had left only half an hour before. The watercolour landscapes had been replaced by heavy oils depicting such topics as The Destruction of the Red Brigade at Scunthorpe (the Major's choice, he assumed) and Madrid by Moonlight (Miss Mapp's), while the bookcase had disappeared entirely and in its place stood a

marble bust of General Franco atop a Romanesque pedestal. Even the construction had changed, with plain tiles in place of floorboards and whitewashed walls as far as the eye could see. It was really most gratifying what a single small amendment could do to history, if only one knew what one was doing. The Doctor would have made a huge and very public fuss about meddling with the timelines, the inviolability of history and the need to put the good of the universe above personal gain - unless it suited him of course. Personally he thought that the man had simply never liked the boy Adric.

'So,' Miss Mapp eagerly interrupted his musings, 'how did your mysterious plan go? Were you able to achieve whatever it was that you said would ruin Lucia's ridiculous pageant?'

In fact, the Master wasn't entirely certain what he had achieved, though it would never do to admit that to a mere human. One might as well attempt to explain a minor error in hyperspatial navigation to a Varga plant.

That the death of Drake had, as intended, led to Spanish control over England seemed certain, but how that would impact upon Mrs Lucas's festival...well, that would need to be checked. In the meantime, he bowed his head slightly and murmured 'your servant, Señora Mapp,' in as equivocal a tone as possible and left it at that.

Evidently it was enough, for his hostess smiled with all her teeth and clapped her hands together in joy, like a small, fat child offered a second helping of dessert. 'How clever you are, Señor Masters,' she squealed. She pushed herself from her seat with some difficulty and reached for a silver bell on a nearby sideboard. 'I shall have Withers bring us a glass of my family's own little vintage. Only a few vines, and so difficult to keep healthy in our English climate, but the 1898 elderberry port was mentioned favourably in a footnote in that year's English Wine Connoisseur.'

Before she could do so, the Master quickly held up a hand and pled the need to run an errand in the village before he could allow himself so sybaritic a pleasure. 'A trifle, Señora, a mere checking of one or two minor details, but I will not be satisfied until I do so.' He rose and bowed a farewell, sweeping from the room so quickly that her protests fell into an empty room.

Once safely in the lane outside Grebe, he considered whether he had become weak during his incarceration. Once he would have destroyed the ridiculous woman the instant he saw her, and would undoubtedly have rendered her screaming into her constituent atoms for offering him elderberry port, whatever that might be, but now he actually found himself enjoying the triviality of it all. Perhaps it was the sense of freedom he felt in suddenly finding himself free of constant surveillance, but there was definitely something to be said for playing with the fate of a planet for no other reason than sport. No grand plans to rule the universe (in retrospect, how had he ever thought that was even possible? The clue to the difficulty in controlling an area that size lay in the word itself), no need to humiliate the Doctor, annoy the Time Lords or vex the Rani (now why had he thought of her? Gaudily dressed hags were obviously much on his mind today). Just simple, honest sport. It really was most healthy.

He hurried down the lane towards the village with a spring in his step and a smile of sheer pleasure on his face. There was bound to be some fresh sport to be had there.

As luck would have it, the two men arrived at Tilling High Street at almost the same moment, with the Doctor rounding the corner from West Street just as the Master strode into the far end of the road. Fortunately, his attention was caught by the sound of shouted orders coming from the direction of the Town Hall and so the Doctor was able to slip behind a postbox, then duck inside Ye Olde Teahouse and watch his old foe make his way towards him. A second's grace, a flurry of Venusian Aikido and the malicious swine would be safely in custody.

Closer...

Closer...

The Doctor tensed, tiger-like, ready to pounce.

'Will it be the eighteenpenny tea, with taco shells and chopped tomato?' a small voice asked behind him.

Only centuries of training, rigorous decades spent in meditation and a certain propensity to a trick knee saved Godiva Plastow from a deadly assault. The Doctor withheld his attack with an irritated glare, and spun back round - just in time to see the Master's back

disappearing down a side street. He declined a small cake to go, and hurried after him.

The sound which had roused the Master's curiosity was coming from the side of the Town Hall. The Master drew his weapon as he heard the sound of a shot and, keeping close to the wall, cautiously peeped round the corner.

In the yard proper, a large, non-descript van stood idling in the gateway, directly in front of a group of filthy, dust-covered men, each of them wearing some variation on the same simple brown uniform. Iron chains threaded though ankle restraints linked every man to his neighbours, while a similar, lighter arrangement bound them at the wrists. Standing to one side of this motley crowd was the source of the shot; a portly, balding, red-faced man in a dishevelled linen suit, stained shirt and loosened tie, who held a rifle in his right hand and a partially smoked cigar in the other. Sweat trickled down his face in the summer heat as he bellowed orders in a variety of languages, none especially correct but all clearly designed to drive the prisoners into the van.

'Quai-hai! And the next one goes through one of you, mark my words! Prisa! Prisa!'

In response, the first of the prisoners shuffled forward and pulled himself over the tailboard and into the back of the van. The Master leaned against the wall and watched the spectacle. It did his heart good to see a proper bully at work.

The Doctor was also present, though at one step removed, watching the Master watching Flint, like an artist's exercise in perspective. In the past few moments he had re-evaluated his priorities a little, for what point was there in taking the Master back to the 1970s if all he would find there was Generalissimo Allesandro Lethbridge-Stewart and Sargento Juan Benton? Better to fix the problem at source, and then come back and grab hold of the Master.

With a final glance at the Master's unsuspecting back, he trotted back to the High Street and headed for Mallards. It would have been better if he'd also taken the time to check on Diva Plastow, who even now was speaking to a policeman about the suspicious character who had briefly popped into her tea room.

The village was not a large one, geographically at least, and it took only a few minutes for the Doctor to navigate back to Lucia's, though he almost walked past it, now that every house in the village displayed the same windowless white walls to the world. Only the unusual addition of the garden-room stopped him in his tracks, and allowed him to slip quickly back inside.

'If you won't let me help you, dear one, then you can't really complain that it's sticking out! Now, do try to keep quiet, or someone will hear you and we'll both end up in front of a firing squad!'

Lucia's voice carried through from the garden and caused the Doctor to slide to a halt. Georgie's reply was too quiet to make out, but it was plain from his tone that he was nervous, if apologetic. Further muffled sounds followed, until finally Lucia declared whatever they were up to, impossible.

The Doctor stepped round the corner and into the garden. The tableau which greeted him was quite unexpected.

Lucia stood with her hand in mid-air, caught in the act of sliding what was undoubtedly a rifle into the lining of Georgie's scarlet cloak. The wooden stock of another jutted from the waistband of his trousers, and what could only be the handles of several knives peeped from the tops of his boots. As Lucia caught sight of the Doctor she gave a gasp, causing Georgie, who had his back to the house, to ponderously turn round, amid much clanking of metalwork.

'Doctor!' they said as one, the effect rendered melodious by the tinkling of the silver bells which adorned Georgie's boots.

'Run, Lucia! Save yourself!' Georgie shouted heroically, attempting to step forward and simultaneously draw the sword which he now had attached to his belt, but hampered in both endeavours by the weight and distribution of the other weapons on his person. The attempt was valiant, but doomed. Slowly, but with all the inevitability of a tree chopped for timber, he toppled to one side and came to rest at an angle against the garden wall.

Lucia, for her part, did nothing at first. She stood with her head unbowed and stared directly at the Doctor, before cautiously moving towards Georgie and pulling him back to his feet. Once he was

restored to equilibrium, she resumed her silent observation.

'So,' the Doctor finally said, 'you two are the resistance, are you?'

'And you are a weapon of the oppressive state!' Georgie piped up, feeling it incumbent on him to say something stalwart, his previous gesture having come so disastrously unstuck.

'We are a part of it, yes,' Lucia added, more solemnly than was her wont. Suddenly, she felt terribly tired and quite unlike herself. She had enjoyed being a rebel, it was true; meeting other, like-minded individuals in clandestine locations (though mainly at bridge games, if truth be told), using special handshakes and passing on secret codes concealed in intricate petit-point samplers. And she could not deny, to herself at least, that it had filled her with pleasure to tweak the nose of Major-General Flint and his revolting paramour, Elizabeth Mapp. But now that it was at an end, she wondered if she were entirely suited to a form of intrigue that required complete anonymity. Once the Doctor had her and Georgie inside his Guardia Box, they would become non-people, never again mentioned by anyone with any sense, all of their heroics forgotten. It was terribly unfair.

Still, better to get it over with, before Georgie did something else foolish. She held out her wrists as she'd seen poor Olga do when they'd come to take her away as an undesirable intellectual and whispered 'brave heart' to Georgie. She did hope that he wouldn't cry.

What felt to Lucia like several minutes passed, but all the Doctor did was cock his head to one side and…chuckle. She wondered at first if this was fresh new tactic of the Guardia, but examine it as she would, she could see no benefit to the authorities in even the most aggressive form of chuckling. She was on the verge of demanding to be taken away, when he spoke unexpectedly. 'What do you think you're doing?' he asked with a raised eyebrow which briefly reminded her that she'd once thought him dashing.

'Giving ourselves up,' Lucia replied, and though she intended it to be a statement, she wasn't entirely convinced that it hadn't come out as a question. Certainly, the Doctor seemed to take it that way.

'Oh, I don't think so, Lucia,' he said. He smiled reassuringly. 'I don't know who you think I am, but contrary to recent opinions I'm

neither the Police, nor whatever passes for the authorities in this twisted version of reality. I am exactly what I said I was when first we met. A man on the hunt for a criminal named the Master. This alternate Tilling is undoubtedly his work, and I was rather hoping that you might be able to help me catch him.'

'Catch him?' asked Lucia, uncertainly, still wary of a trap and now wondering if the Doctor weren't actually an escaped lunatic. 'How can we do that?'

'Always happy to help the authorities, of course,' added Georgie, demonstrating once more his marvellous powers of recovery.

The Doctor rubbed a finger along the side of his nose, and glanced from one to the other. 'Well, there you have me, I'm afraid. I know what needs to be done, you see. I need someone to hold the Master captive here in Tilling while I pop back in time and knock him on the head in whichever corner of history he's perverted. A minor infraction of the laws of time, but there you go…' He frowned again. 'But I'm not completely convinced that there's anyone in Tilling capable of carrying out the first part of that plan.'

'Try me!' Georgie offered eagerly. 'I do have weapons, you know,' he added, gesturing painfully at the rifles sticking out from his clothing.

'And I've always fancied doing a little shooting,' said Lucia. 'Though,' she concluded, 'I'd previously always had grouse in mind.'

Once again, the Doctor looked from Lucia to Georgie and back again. Finally, he nodded as though coming to a decision. 'Very well, then. Needs must and all that.' He reached over and pulled the rifle from Georgie and placed it carefully in his hand, while Lucia held the other before her in what she hoped was the correct fashion.

The Doctor shook his head, and gestured towards the door to the lane outside. 'Follow me then. And for goodness sake, be careful where you point those guns!'

In single file, the small army marched through the garden door and out into the lane. Georgie, bringing up the rear, almost shot Lucia in the back as she shuddered to a halt directly in front of him, but before he could complain he saw the reason for her sudden stop.

Arrayed in front of them were two rows of Guardia Civil, led by Major-General Flint., and behind them a motley collection of their so-called friends and neighbours. Every one of them held a weapon of some sort, ranging from El Padre clutching a small ceremonial knife in a shaky hand to Elizabeth Mapp who stood alongside a dark-skinned, bearded man who could only be the Master and pointed a long black tube in their direction.

'Why, Doctor,' said the Master, in exactly the sort of voice Georgie expected a villain to have, 'leaving us so soon.' He smiled, but it wasn't a pleasant smile, in Georgie's opinion. It reminded him of the way in which the Major-General smiled whenever a Republican prisoner tried to escape and failed, or the way El Padre smiled when describing the hell which awaited Protestants. Predatory was the word. Worryingly, both men were wearing those exact smiles at that very moment. He suddenly wished he'd stuck to embroidery and never let Lucia convince him to get involved with the resistance. Too late now, though, he supposed.

His mind had wandered, he realised, for he'd missed whatever the Master had said next. But from the way Lucia was holding his hand in public, he suspected it hadn't been positive.

The Doctor was speaking now. 'Let these two go, and let's settle this between ourselves, shall we?' he was saying, but it was pretty clear that the Master had no intention of doing any such thing. Instead he reached out with one gloved hand (the man was dressed entirely in black, Georgie noticed, and briefly had to fight the urge to offer his condolences) and lifted the long tube thing from Elizabeth's hand. Then he raised it before his face, flicked a switch on its base and murmured 'goodbye Doctor, and good riddance.'

Georgie squeezed Lucia's hand and closed his eyes.

Elizabeth had been feeling peculiar all day. Something she could only describe as a gentle tugging appeared to be guiding her every step, leaving her no control over her own mind. She imagined Lucia felt like that all the time, slave as she was to every passing fad and fashion. But she was unused to the sensation and was swiftly growing tired of it.

Take this very moment, for example. What on Earth was she doing simpering at the side of that fellow Masters. True, he had been

beguiling initially, and his understanding of her plight had been welcome, but even so, she was at a loss to explain the manner in which she had followed him from Grebe to Mallards.

And all the others. There was something wrong with them too. Major Benjy positively reeked of whisky and the Padre's Scotchness had been replaced by an unattractive European tint. Now why had she called him Major Benjy? And what Scotchness? The Scotch were the enemy, were they not? But she remembered something..

She concentrated with all of her considerable might on Masters, who stood only a foot or so away from her, pointing a gun of some sort at Lucia and Don...Mister Georgie. Mister Georgie. Major Benjy. The Padre. Mister Georgie. Major Benjy. The Padre. Mister Georgie. Major Benjy. The Padre.

She repeated the litany of names as Masters' words came into sharp focus.

'Goodbye Doctor, and good riddance.'

His voice, which had once seemed so smooth and velvet, now seemed laden with menace and cruelty. She shook her head sharply, the motion clearing a few more of the cobwebs which cushioned her brain. He was going to kill Lucia and Georgie, and the stranger too. And after she had expressly forbidden any such thing.

No man ignored Elizabeth Mapp, of that she was certain. It mattered little to her whether the Major had fallen from the wagon (little at the moment, in any case), or that Mister Georgie was dressed as a sort of mobile raspberry truffle. Nobody – and most definitely not some suave newcomer to Tilling – flouted her wishes and escaped scot free.

Having come to a decision, the work itself was that of a moment. She turned on her heel (what was she wearing?), and grabbed the rifle from the Major, who was to surprised to resist, then, reversing it in her hands brought the butt crashing down upon Mister Masters head.

For a second, nobody moved. Then everything seemed to happen at once. Masters crumpled at the knees, and the stranger he had called Doctor stepped forward and grasped him under the arms. A welter of exclamations filled the air. The Major shouted 'How dare you...' but

was drowned out by the Doctor barking orders as he dragged Masters down the lane towards Porpoise Street.

‘I’ll take the Master with me, Lucia. All you need to do is stay there until I deal with the other one. Once that’s done everything should spring back into place.’

The last few words were difficult to make out, for he was already turning the corner. But it was plain what needed to be done. She flipped the rifle in her hands again and pointed it at the dusky imitation of the Major. Behind her she heard Lucia and Georgie cock their own weapons. The rest of the village raised their hands slowly into the still, hot air.

She wondered how long she would have to wait...she did have many other matters which needed her attention, after all.

Director's Cut

Una McCormack

'Of course,' said the man, 'it's not really a tapestry as such. A true tapestry has the design woven into the material. This is, of course, embroidered—'

The young woman standing beside him said, 'You just read that off the wall.'

'Off the *what***?'**

'Off the wall,' she said. 'Over there. I'm not stupid, you know!'

The man tutted and moved along, peering closely at the sewn panels as he went. 'Truly a miracle,' he said. 'A miracle in the making, and a miracle that it has survived this long. Do you realise, Peri, that this piece of linen and thread is more than *five thousand* **years old?'**

'Doctor,' she said, patiently. 'I can read too. And it's not a tapestry, remember? Not really.'

'Hmm. Well. No. But it's still very old! And its survival is still nothing short of miraculous. Petty wars! Fire, flood, famine! The burning of France! The burning of Europe. The burning of *Earth***! Yes, many things survived that, but nothing, I think, so fragile, and so mysterious...'**

The young woman stood and looked at one of the panels. There was a comet on it. 'It *is* **lovely,' she said, softly. 'And so sad. Everyone who made it, everyone upon it – all gone. All lost in the mists of time...'**

'Huh,' said the man.

'What?' the woman.

'That's not right,' said the man.

'*You're* **not right,' said the woman. 'Doctor, what's the matter now?'**

'Look,' said the man. 'Look at this.'

The woman looked. 'Huh,' she said. 'That's not right.'

'Oh blimey,' muttered Vorg. 'I think the game might be up.'

And Shirna, watching the pair as they peered at the sea monster attacking the Conqueror, thought, *I'll get my hands on that coat if it's the last thing I do.*

Cut to museum exterior, late at night. Shadows on the wall: two of them, inching forwards. 'Are you sure this is a good idea, Vorg?' whispers Shirna. She's cold and a little bit hungry. It's not been a good few months.

'It'll have to be,' says Vorg. 'Can't leave it in there for anyone to see, can we?'

'No-one's seen it yet,' Shirna says.

'There were those two just this afternoon!'

'They went away, didn't they?' says Shirna. 'Went off to wherever they came from.'

'Well, there'll be more. And then there'll be trouble. Easier this way.'

Easier. Shirna isn't too sure. They tiptoe along the wall towards the back of the museum. 'Are you sure she's left the door open for you?' Shirna says.

'I read her palm. She thinks I'm a marvel.'

'Oh well,' says Shirna. 'That's bound to be fine.'

They inch on. Two more figures slip out of the shadows. One of them stretches out his hand, like a monster. He taps Vorg on the shoulder.

Vorg jumps.

Shirna shrieks.

'Well, *hello***, Vorg,' says the Doctor. 'My, but it's bona to vada** *your* **dolly old eek.'**

‘Ooh, thanks ever so for this!’ said Shirna, as she tucked into her supper. ‘It’s going down a treat.’

Peri, smiling, said, ‘You’re welcome.’

The Doctor, meanwhile, was interrogating Vorg. ‘So that was the plan? To steal the Bayeux Tapestry?’

‘In my defence,’ said Vorg, ‘I didn’t say it was a good plan. But – well, you saw it, Doctor! There’s a sea monster on the beach at Hastings! Someone’s going to notice!’

‘But why does it matter?’ said Peri. ‘It’s just a picture, isn’t it? I mean, there wasn’t a sea monster on the beach at Hastings, was there.’ She looked round at the others. ‘*Was* there?’

‘I assume,’ said the Doctor, ‘that something went wrong when you sent all the creatures back from the Scope. Is it just the one Drashig we’re chasing, or will there be more? Cybermen at Agincourt, perhaps? Or a couple of Daleks at Crécy?’

‘Just the one Drashig,’ said Vorg. ‘And I’m not chasing it.’

‘You’re not chasing it?’ said the Doctor. ‘So what, pray, *are* you doing?’

Vorg shrugged. Shirna, through a mouthful of something fried, said, ‘He’s hiding the evidence.’

There was a pause. ‘You’re right,’ said the Doctor. ‘It isn’t a good plan. In fact, it’s a terrible plan. Irresponsible, thoughtless – you mean you would simply leave a Drashig loose to wreak havoc in Anglo-Saxon England?’

‘Why not?’ said Vorg. ‘The Conqueror’s only going to do the same.’

The Doctor stood up. ‘Peri!’ he commanded. ‘Come with me!’

‘We’ve not finished supper,’ said Peri. ‘Besides, if you think I’m going back to the dark ages—’

‘*Middle* ages—’

‘Back to the *middle* ages to see off a sea monster, you can forget it. I don’t like history. I don’t like getting my feet wet. And I particularly

don't like sea monsters.' She nodded at Vorg. 'I prefer his plan – or something like it.'

'We can't *steal* the Bayeux Tapestry!' cried the Doctor, attracting the attention of one or two of the café's less salubrious patrons; then, after his companions had firmly hushed him, he repeated, more softly, 'We *can't* steal the Bayeux Tapestry!'

'No,' said Peri, 'but we can steal a *bit* of it.' She smiled. 'Now. Has anyone brought a pair of scissors?'

'Ooh yes,' said Shirna, pulling out her make-up bag. 'Never leave home without them, that's what I say.'

The final plan, cooked up over the remains of supper, wasn't much better by the time they'd all had their say, but at least it had chutzpah. The next morning, after the museum opened, Shirna, wearing the Doctor's coat, went back into the museum, scissors in hand. Meanwhile, Vorg and the Doctor, a little ahead of her, bickered noisily over the meaning of the comet. When their debate looked about set to become fisticuffs, a couple of security guards popped up from nowhere and started to wrestle them out. While their attention was elsewhere, there was a quick *snip snip*, and the offending section was concealed against the pattern of the Doctor's coat. Out Shirna hurried, coat wrapped around her, to where the Doctor, Peri, and Vorg were waiting in the cold day.

'Success?' said Peri.

Shirna smiled. 'Success.'

They all peered down at the little piece she had cut from the tapestry, nestling in her hand. 'Good likeness,' said the Doctor.

Vorg shuddered. 'Doesn't capture the half of it.'

'And that's it?' said Peri, suspiciously. 'You're happy with this?'

'What do you mean, Peri?' the Doctor said.

'Well, just because we've got this, doesn't mean that there isn't a Drashig back there at Hastings—'

'If there *was*,' said the Doctor, 'nobody is saying anything about it

now.'

'But it's still there back then, isn't it?' said Peri. Then, despairingly, '*Isn't* it?'

The Doctor took the little piece of cloth and tucked it into his trouser pocket. 'It's complicated, Peri. Too complicated for the ordinary, small human brain.' He turned to Vorg. 'Well,' he said, 'if that's *everything*, Vorg, we should be on our way.'

'So long, then, Doctor,' said Vorg. 'Glad you came by when you did.'

'Ta ta,' said Shirna, and she burrowed for a moment deeper into the Doctor's coat. 'Ooh though, I'll miss this! It's ever so cosy!'

The Doctor bowed, like a gentleman. 'Keep it,' he said.

'Thank goodness for that,' muttered Peri.

The Doctor's eye gleamed perilously. 'The wardrobe in the TARDIS is wide and deep. Plenty more where that came from.' He turned to his companion. 'Now, Peri,' he said. 'Perhaps we should take a little look at Hastings after all. Just to be sure.'

Bickering, they made their way off down the street.

'Clever what he did with his face, though,' said Vorg. 'Think we could do something like that?'

Shirna snuggled further into her new coat. 'On days like this, Vorg, I think we can do anything.'

The Ox Bow Train

Simon Bucher-Jones

George Morrow wakes with a jolt. Normally the train is crowded about now. Some days the commute involves standing chest deep in people, but today the carriage is almost eerily deserted. Just a few of his fellow wage slaves returning home.

The nights are drawing in and it's dark at six thirty. Outside the train window the meandering river makes a slow sweep across its flood plain. The track, newly repaired from the last floods, stands proud with a fresh concrete edge. If it were day, he'd see under the waves (no not waves, silly, ripples – it's a river not the sea), the artificial pylons – like the exterior supports you see on old churches, ah, buttresses – that's the word. George remembers how that would have made Charles laugh. Oh Charles, thou should be living at this hour – why should a worm, an ant, a rat have life, and you none? He can't remember the quote (Romeo and Juliet?) any more than before he had remembered the word. It's dark, he's, tired and, frankly, old, and Charles: dead at twenty, never aged. In Georges mind he stayed young forever, a twin brother who – like the Dorian to George's Portrait, preserves the best somewhere beyond time. If only one could live on forever.

Elsewhere

The TARDIS stood in a meadow, whose land long fallow had lost the contours of the plough, and either hunched itself up in some tremor, or been endowed by Neolithic burials with a low mound near the centre. Thanks to the mound the ship was on a slant, but that didn't seem to bother the Doctor who darted out, hat in hand, and stood for a moment in his tattered jacket and checked trousers flinging his arms wide, and taking in a deep breath of the buttercup and daisy scented air.

Ben and Polly followed him, relieved at their arrival somewhere other than the mercury swamps of a lost planet. This newly renewed Doctor, whose different face and mannerisms were still causing Ben some qualms, was no more able to guide the Tardis to a preselected

landing point than his older pre-renewal form had been. Still, he seemed to have regained an almost childlike appreciation for the world which the Doctor who had collapsed at Snowcap Base, had lost – or perhaps hidden.

'Where are we Doctor?' Polly asked, willing – as Ben had not been – to at least pay lip-service to the idea that they might have arrived somewhere identifiable even if unplanned.

'Telegraph Poles!' The Doctor shouted, 'lovely twentieth century, Telegraph Poles!

Adopting a declaiming stance like an orator on a rostrum, he proclaimed:

'I think no galumphing Black Hole, as lovely as a Telegraph Pole! For one no information spares, it has no hair to mark it, the other helps men sell their wares and send demands to market'. Or is that Transmat. Dear me, how it all runs together. I must look out my diary.'

'What are you on about, Doc?' Ben asked, not sure if he actually wanted an explanation. The crucial point, that the telegraph poles were even more familiar artifacts of his time, than the scents of the meadow were identifiers of his planet, he had already grasped. Maybe he could get back to his ship, maybe even if he timed it right (by being a trifle early in time) manage not to be considered AWOL. Of course that would mean loosing touch with the Duchess especially if she opted to continue with the Doctor, and he was starting to feel very fond of her.

His train of thought was interrupted, appropriately enough, by an actual train.

But not such a train as he had ever expected to see, passing along the rails, at the end of a meadow, half hidden by English hedgerows.

It was a black iron, parody of a modern train, its wheels silvered with skulls half-glimpsed as they spun, its coachwork dark liveried with baronial arms of monsters and mer-folk entwined in battle or lust. It did not steam (although it had funnels and brass domes atop its modern lines), and it was only as it passed that the sheer silence of it stilled the birdsong of the meadow like a blanket of awful suffocating density. At the windows faces white and dark alike pressed with a

finality that suggested a terminus to its journey that ended at the world's edge, or at a forest of gallows.

'Well, that's not a British Rail train,' the Doctor said, affronted – 'I knew denationalisation would end in tears' (Neither Ben nor Polly understood this remark) 'But this is ridiculous'.

Elsewhere

Sally Carruthers sat in her window seat, looking out over the downs and hoping that her journey would be in vain. In her bag a telegram crunched once in a fist that though dainty had closed with all the anger of despair, and then smoothed as best she could manage, spelled out her fears in cautious medical terms. He might die before she ever saw him again. If only she could avoid that meeting, if there were some honourable way. If she saw him she would have to forgive him, and in her heart she knew she would sooner die. No one could blame a daughter delayed by a train. If only she could just sit in this seat forever, or until his life had slipped away.

Elsewhere

The Doctor had bustled them back inside the TARDIS, and spent a minute ferreting about in a wicker basket under the Ormolu Clock marked, Pantoloon's Props. He stuffed something in one of his pockets.

Ben and Polly clamoured for answers. 'What what was it?' Polly insisted, 'some sort of fancy ghost train?'

'I reckon you're right Duchess', Ben pitched in, more nervous himself than he wanted to show. 'It'll be an excursion tour, round the haunted castles and that. All the toffs dressed up for a lark, like on *The Good Old Days'.*

'They looked so scared, though', Polly faltered. She was a kind hearted woman even if her kindness sometimes had a noblesse oblige edge to it that Ben teased her about.

The Doctor was pacing round the TARDIS' controls, looking thoughtful. 'I don't like some of these readings. Look at the colour of this indicator, would you say that was cerise?'

Ben and Polly exchanged glances – the TARDIS' workings might as

well be in black and white for all the sense they made to them.

'Yes,' Polly said, and 'No,' Ben said – at the same moment.

'That's what I thought,' the Doctor beamed, 'hang on!' and he flung the dematerialisation lever in a direction he'd never thrown it before, almost as if it were a gear stick going into reverse, or a switch being thrown on a railway.

Elsewhere

'Are we nearly there?' Sally and Bartholomew chorused, for the thousandth time.

Headache at full swell, their mother snapped. 'It would serve you right if we never get to Weston-Super-Mare, you spoilt children! Now please try to be quiet, and look at the nice countryside.'

'I don't like it any more,' Sally sniffed, 'the trees are funny.'

Mrs. Merridew, squinted through the dark (really the clouds had rolled up suddenly, it would be typical if it rained all holiday), and saw the thrashing motion of the branches (were they branches, really?) against the awful horror of the sky. This was dreadful, she would, she would write to the railway company, as soon as, as soon as...

Elsewhere

'Now, listen this is important,' the Doctor said, after the TARDIS had come to a shuddering and clunking halt. 'You have to remember three things'.

'Yes, Doctor.' Polly looked expectant.

'Firstly, if you see the conductor don't tell him your name. Secondly don't eat anything from the buffet or in the train at all – not even a pomegranate seed, and thirdly...'

Ben tapped his fingers on the consol edge impatiently.

'Don't do that you'll leave finger marks, now since that's all clear, I'm going to open the door.'

Ben, wondering if he'd missed something, asked 'Should we not take a look on the scanner Doc, before going out.'

‘If we were going out, that would be very good advice, Ben, but I’m afraid we’re going sideways.’

Elsewhere

George Morrow wakes with a jolt. Normally the train is crowded about now. Some days the commute involves standing chest deep in people, but today the carriage is almost eerily deserted. Just a few of his fellow wage slaves returning home.

The conductor is standing in the aisle of the train, he’s checking tickets. His uniform is the colour of mottled grey velvet, or cold gravy. There’s a clacking sound as he moves, jerky as a stop frame animation. George finds he can’t bring himself to raise his gaze up to the conductor’s face.

‘Charles Morrow’ - The voice is sepulchral and also somehow unctuous as of a plump churchwarden imitating the tolling a bell.

‘No I’m George, George, I tell you. I didn’t die.’

George/Charles voice rises in a nightmare scream, ‘I didn’t die’.

‘Oh but you did, see your ticket is punched clean through, it’s the Dark Terminus for You.’ And the Conductor put his bony hand on Charles Morrow’s shoulder and pushed him back down into his grave-soil seat.

Elsewhere on board the train

The TARDIS filled a whole private compartment, and the Doctor, Ben and Polly had only just been able to squeeze out (Ben by climbing over the seats). The upholstery was patterned with odd illustrations of toadstools, fashioned into little fairy houses.

Ben suspected that Polly had been about to proclaim them quaint, but the Doctor’s identification of the fungi as Death Caps (Amanita Phalloides), Destroying Angels (Amanita Virosa), Deadly Web Caps (Cortinarius Rubellus), Panther Caps (Amanita Pantherina), Fly Agaric (Amanita Muscaria), and False Morel (Gyromita Esculenta) – all of them poisonous (although as the Doctor said of the Panther Caps, still very desireable as residences) had taken the word from her lips.

‘Right, Doc, before we go any farther, I think you ought to tell us

where we are.' Ben said, keeping his voice as reasonable as he could.

'Didn't I?' The Doctor ticked off three fingers – 'I was sure, I'd been sure to tell you.

'One of you must have interrupted me. This is a Fairy Train Of Granted Wishes and it's possibly the most dangerous place a mortal can tread, but I don't see how we can let it go by without trying to help its vict...er..passengers.'

'Fairies? Polly simpered, 'honestly Doctor you must think I'm eight.'

'No, no. I'm not talking about cardboard cut outs photographed by naughty school girls, or the Red, Yellow or Green Fairy Books of Mr Andrew Lang. I'm talking about a very dangerous phenomenon indeed, to which the term Fay or Sidhe, or the kindly folk, has been attached in the past, but which your near future will come to know as alien abduction.'

'What, kidnapping by aliens?' Ben scoffed, 'pull the other one'.

The Doctor took off his hat and rolled it nervously between his hands. For a moment he seemed as abashed as a schoolboy caught in some vulgar prank. 'Well you know my dears, there is a sense in which...I hardly like to say it, but there is a point of view from which it could, I suppose, be said that....'

'Oh never mind all that,' Polly jumped in, 'we forced ourselves on you, you didn't kidnap anyone. We wanted adventure and we found it. Just tell us what we have to do.'

'There's a good girl. Well there are some corners of Old England that have bred the most terrible things. The iron railways did for them mostly, but every so often the way the trains shift on the tracks, the masses of iron shunting to and fro – do you know how waves can resonate? Increase or cancel out? No? Never mind.

'Well, very, very, very, rarely something that mainly stops a thing, suddenly amplifies it, and then the ghosts ride the rails! Then an ill-considered wish in a commuter's noggin can send them sideways into the halls of hell. Just remember what I said about the conductor and the pomegranates, and the other thing, and we should be fine.'

‘Pomegranates,’ Polly rolled the word around, and a memory from her Latin class surfaced. ‘Persephone was kidnapped by Hades, and went into the Underworld and the Gods demanded she be released but she’d eaten three Pomegranate seeds so Hades had a hold on her, and she had to be married to Hades for half the year, and so we got the seasons.’

‘Oh well done.’ The Doctor beamed. ‘Gold star, Polly. Now come along behind me carefully, we’re going to go up and down the train and see who can get off at...’ He pointed at the ship: ‘TARDIS HALT.’ He paused and Polly could see the sadness in his eyes. ‘We may be here too late for some, but we can try.’

Here

Osmond, Elspeth, and Clive were bored. The holidays were almost over and the train taking them back to Whitemeadows School, was taking simply ages. Even the familiar countryside seemed grey and washed out, and Clive wasn’t helping by playing a game that involved pretending to see zombies every time they passed a level crossing or an abandoned siding.

‘There’s another one, Elspeth,’ he shouted. ‘A postman, with the bottom of his jaw hanging off’. As before when Elspeth and Osmond looked the figure had been whisked away into the foggy murk.

‘You beast Clive, you wouldn’t carry on like this if Penelope were here.’

‘I did see zombies,’ Clive shouted, ‘drooling zombies! Why won’t you believe me, I say I wish you’d...’

A hand clamped around his mouth, at the end of an arm clad in a misfitting black sleeve. Almost convinced they were about to see a zombie, Elspeth and Osmond cowered back in their seats – but it was only a funny little man in an odd hat, with two teenagers (a man and a woman) with him.

‘Now don’t bite, my young master.’ the man said – with what Osmond later said had been a west-country accent. Elspeth – incidently - did not agree on this point and she always maintained that whatever accent it was, the man had only that moment adopted it, for she had been watching the faces of the teenagers particularly the man,

whom Penelope would later josh her about, and he (so Elspeth said) had rolled his eyes to heaven with a 'what now' expression as soon as the Man in The Hat had begun to speak.

'Those that bite, live and die as animals, or don't they? I'm going to take my hand away, and I'm a-askin' you as a personal favour to an old Hurdy Gurdy Man – not to go making any wishes on this here train. There's been quite enough of that already.'

'Are you a hurdy gurdy man?' Clive asked, when the hand released him. It had tasted of bread and butter, but he hadn't been inclined to bite it even though he had been the biter of the family as a baby. Something about the taste had suggested electric bread and butter, or an electric eel sandwich.

'No he's not, he's the Doc..' Ben began, but the whirl of flapping hands and panic from Polly, stopped him. 'If you see the conductor don't say your name,' she hissed. 'Well I see him, so don't say his.' She was looking back over Ben's shoulder.

'That's not his name.'

'It's quite enough of a name,' the erstwhile Hurdy-Gurdy Man, said, 'to make it inadvisable here. How we're known, lights us up, or doesn't it. Names end up in Lights or so they say. Or maybe only named things can end. So my young friends (this to Osmond, Clive, and Elspeth) I won't be asking your names either, and you should keep them behind your teeth.

'Tickets please,' the Conductor said, looming up like a cloud or a special effect. 'Osmond James, and Elspeth and Clive Moonshiner, isn't it – all bound for Summer's End term in the Whitemeadows. No Penelope...?'

'She's ill'. 'We don't know any Penelope', and 'My name is Jane actually, so much more sensible than Elspeth', were uttered almost in one breath, and with the same

Panic.

Seeing the conductor was almost impossible, but feeling you were about to see him was horrible. He was like something behind a curtain or edging around a corner that you were certain would be awful when

it came fully into view, but which seemed the worse for the way it prolonged the process.

The Hurdy Gurdy Man shouted that they should close their eyes tight, and trusting him, they did.

Much, much, later the three (who *were* all saved) would try to tell Penelope what little they had seen but the best they could manage was:

(Clive) – He was like Major Shuttler at school, the one who keeps trying to be friends with the younger boys, but who looks as if he'd eat them up if he could.

(Osmond) – It wasn't a man at all, but a thundercloud in a conductor's uniform, and where there should have been a face, there was only a billow of cloud and two glints of lightning.

(Elspeth) – Well I didn't see a cloud, or a teacher, I saw three dwarfs crammed into a conductor's outfit, trying to make it look as if they were a single man. How you couldn't have seen that Clive, I've no idea.

Penelope said the dwarfs didn't sound that frightening, but Elspeth refused to say any more after that, and there was bad feeling between her and Penny for a week until the Joint Fete with St. Mumin's and their triumph on the coconut shy.

Here

Once Ben had bundled the three into the TARDIS with firm instructions to keep their eyes closed tight. He hurried back along the train's corridor (a stone clad corridor on a train?) in the hope of catching up with the Doctor and Polly.

He found them leading a harassed mother and two children (all blindfolded) back in his direction.

'But I don't understand why we can't see the way to Weston,' the mother was grumbling. 'This isn't like any security exercise I've ever been involved with. I shall certainly write to the papers about this.'

The Doctor was making placatory noises and speaking soothingly as a person might to a horse that having been lead to water had still to be persuaded to take a drink.

‘It’s the meteor shower,’ he said ‘best you don’t see it or you’ll have no end of trouble with weeds. We in the Gardener’s Question Time Tactical Response Unit are very quick on Triffid outbreaks’. He winked at Polly, ‘I always say if you have to have a catastrophe you should try to have a cosy one.’

He past the woman’s hand to Ben, ‘take her off the train at TARDIS HALT, and make sure she and the children keep their eyes covered until the emergency is over. It’s best no one sees anything alarming, on the train or off. Come on Polly, more people to see!’

Here

‘Sally Carruthers, your ticket please.’ She had been staring at her hands for maybe an hour, and hadn’t decided what she could, what she’d say if her father wasn’t dead, and she hadn’t heard the conductor come close. A sound of rustling leaves came from the

direction of the voice, and the sound was odd.

Her father was wearing a conductor’s uniform, and his smile hadn’t changed. But it wasn’t leaves that were rustling, and he hadn’t used to have snakes in his hair.

Recalling the myth of the Medusa, she clamped her eyes tight. What the hell was happening. She must have fallen asleep, be dreaming.

Her father’s voice. And another man? Talking.

‘You don’t fear me.’

‘Oh, that’s not true at all. But I know better than to let it get a hold of me, and Polly and Ben have their eyes closed by now. So it’s just you and me.’

‘Their lives are mine by the old rules. They wished in my place of power.

‘I wasn’t in time, not for everyone. Let me take this woman and go. You have no hold on me.’

‘You may have no fear, you may not have wished, you may have no name – but she is fearful, she has wished. Her name is on my lips. She must get out at the Dark Terminus.’

‘What if I stayed instead of her?’

‘What is she to you that you would do this? What are you to us that we should value you above her?’

‘Oh, I’m a genius: I’m sure I could be more fun to boss around for an eternity, and she? I just think maybe she’s suffered enough. Besides, look see, I have something in my pocketses.’

‘A sandwich…?’

‘Indeed, and you know that anyone who eats in your world is yours for the taking.

So promise, you’ll let her go, and I’ll take a big bite. Yum Yum!’

Elsewhere

The Doctor flung himself through the doors of the TARDIS, creatures in conductors’ uniforms gibbering and moaning at his heels, and spitting chunks of polystyrene from his mouth. His fingers stabbed at the dematerialisation switch.

Rock ‘n’ Roll Alien

Stewart Sheargold

‘Good grief,’ said the Doctor, rattling *The Telegraph*.

Jo, dribbling honey on her toast, paused, saw him frowning. Her eyes widened, her heart leapt. Had he finally seen something dastardly, something worthy of his attention?

‘What is it?’ she asked, trying not to sound excited.

‘There’s a chap here,’ he started, ‘selling parts for a roadster at a very reasonable price.’ He smiled. ‘I’ve been meaning to upgrade old Bessie’s gearbox.’

Her eyes glazed. She should have known better than to think he could be shifted from his leisure. She grumbled when she saw she’d spilled honey from her spoon onto the linoleum. She wet a sponge, scrubbed, spent a deliberate moment crouched, hoping he would notice her effort. But when she straightened, he was still studying the newspaper.

You were once a man of action, she thought.

What days they’d had, uncovering the delights and the dangers of the universe in his time machine. That clunky device, as sophisticated as a child’s toy – the dematerialisation circuit – allowing them travel through the far, wide reaches of time and space. How joyous it was when he first recovered his memory. He was like a boy who had escaped school, and he ran and ran to the playing fields, remembering old worlds and finding new worlds, showing her wonders and sights that made her dumb with awe.

Then, one day, she found him brooding in the console room. He said they had to make a trip home – her home, not his – and he brought the TARDIS here, to the Kent countryside, to the ramshackle house in Allen Road, with its overgrown vegetable garden, its fields flourishing with tall weeds, its sense of silence and abandon.

For a month they had done nothing. Truthfully, she had done

nothing. The Doctor had mown the lawns and clipped the gardens, he'd painted the shed and wallpapered the upstairs attic bedroom, he'd tinkered in the TARDIS and cooked a hearty meal each night. He'd read a book every day, taking down the musty first editions from the library shelves, occasionally reading to her from *Robinson Crusoe, Great Expectations, Alice in Wonderland, The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe.* **She began to feel pressed back into childhood. Indolence came over her. When she realised what was happening, she set in course a series of activities. To force her to remain alert.**

She ensured an alarm went off at 6am. She went rambling over the hills, past the ruins of an old church, skirting farms with dry stone walls, sheep bleating at her, climbing high up until she was breathless, so she could look down at the house and its sprawling grounds, and the town with its cottages clustered along the single main street beyond.

She decided to order the library books alphabetically, a gargantuan task considering the size, but had only made a cursory start when the Doctor discovered her intention and crossly told her to put them back the way they were – higgledy piggledy to her – but absolutely catalogued in his mind.

So she went out into the garden, clipping back the straggly apple trees in the orchard, weeding patches of earth, tilling it, creating fallow ground. In the freshly-painted shed she found dried seeds in dusty envelopes, their names pencilled in a spidery hand. She raked rows in the earth and planted lettuce and capsicum, pumpkin and zucchini, tomatoes and chilli. She made tunnels of chicken wire to discourage the birds. She watered them each day and waited for them to push forth that first green shoot.

But after the excitements of the galaxy – of galactic song contests in space stations, of mysterious journeys through forests, deserts and landscapes of glass, of toppling unhinged dictators and falling through black holes – the quiet life was simply not enough.

Jo asked the Doctor how long they would stay. His answer was evasive: 'Everyone needs some quiet time, Jo. After all, I think we deserve it.'

She shook her head at him. 'Doctor, you are the least quiet person I know.'

He rubbed his neck, and sheepishly crumpled his features. 'Yes, well… Just a few more days.'

That was two weeks ago. She wondered why he was so compliant? Was this a ploy? Was he out-thinking some omniscient enemy? Putting on a play of being grounded, comfortable, content to potter away at menial, ordinary, *human* tasks? Only to burst from this lethargy and turn the tables on a startled, complacent villain? But the days lengthened and she began to feel that, while he was waiting for something, it was not earth-shattering. It was not a clever plan to hoodwink anyone. It was merely that he wanted some time. Wasn't that absurd – a Time Lord wanting time out? Silence and calm were his enemy. But she watched him paint the kitchen, and wire the complex security system, read and tidy the bundles of letters on the hall table, and scoop leaves from the fountain in the driveway. She watched him tinker with the VW bug in the garage, and carefully turn the wine bottles in the dim, dank, dusty cellar. And, despite her enforced activities, she found herself succumbing to his drowsy attitude of leisure.

Then she noticed all the strange things happening in the village.

'Mornin', Miss Grant,' said Harry, as she entered the corner store. 'We've got them lovely eggs you liked. Fresh from Angus's farm today. Kept you a dozen.'

She smiled at Harry, whose shining face and bulging eyes disturbed her, but whose kind nature won her over. 'Thank you, Harry. That's very kind.' She unfolded her shopping list.

He eyed it warily. 'Your doctor's not got special orders, 'as he?'

She met his eyes, amused. 'Not this time. Just regular groceries today.'

Harry visibly sighed. Jo didn't blame him for being relieved. The Doctor had pushed the boundaries of country resourcefulness, whether in his orders for rare meat cuts, or strange mechanical parts. Yet Harry somehow managed to procure everything needed.

Jo smiled courteously, eager to be away from Harry's unnerving features, and made her way down the aisles, crossing off items on her list as she slid them from the shelves into her basket.

Flour for the date cake the Doctor wanted to make; almonds to snack on during the day; stilton and mustard and spinach for tonight's quiche; hob nobs for the Doctor. Mustn't forget his lap sang souchong.

The telephone rang loudly in the enclosed space, making her jump. She heard Harry pick it up. She waited for him to answer. Instead, there was a garbled noise, like reversed speech. A dense pause. Then, to her surprise, a mechanical sound, like servos grinding.

Jo, wide-eyed and alert, peered round a shelf at the till. For a moment she couldn't see anything unusual. Then her mind shook itself and made sense of what she saw.

Harry's head had opened to reveal shining transistors and circuitry. The telephone earpiece was screwed into his skull, the receiver held in his open mouth.

Jo stared and stared. But she was used to this sort of oddity. She wasn't frightened. A smile played at the corner of her mouth. Her brain thrummed with excitement.

Harry moved, insect-fast, to regard her. Small lights winked in his open head.

Then she was placing her basket before him, and he cheerily totted up her total, giving her Angus's eggs for free. He smiled at her and she smiled at him, and she thought him a lovely man, and wondered why it was that he unnerved her with his large eyes and misshapen head and limp strands of combed-back hair.

She exited the store with the feeling she'd left something behind. She turned back to see Harry watching her. There was wariness in his smile. The sun shone brightly on the green, the grass translucent, the war memorial incandescent. A plump child stared accusingly at her from the merry-go-round. The swings moved in a breeze. In a field beyond, two sheep were utterly still, watching her. Abruptly she remembered robot sheep stalking her through countryside, and shied at their intent gaze.

The world felt strange, as though she had been pushed into a new timeline. She hurried back to the manor, dropping the groceries on the kitchen floor, running to the Doctor, telling him that something was wrong. The village taken over by aliens, by robots, by vicious children.

She interrupted him in the midst of Bessie's oil change. He appeared from under his beloved roadster greased and grimed. He listened to her alarming stories then gave her a condescending look. 'Oh Jo, don't you think I'd know if anything untoward was going on in the village?'

She protested, but he would not believe a word.

Infuriated, she unpacked the shopping, fairly throwing items into the pantry, then went to have a long bath, taking *Jane's Big Book of Aliens* **with her.**

She viewed everything thereafter with suspicion. The Vicar's church fundraiser was a hotbed of alien collusion, the cakes and pies rich with chemicals to neutralise human aggression for easy takeover; the darts night at the pub on a Wednesday was firing practice; brooding weather was a spaceship seeding the atmosphere with who knew what; a local's friendly smile was a feint before full-scale invasion. Mr Prendergast, owner of *The Salted Witch* **bookstore, could, with his rubbery features, be the Master in disguise, and wasn't that incense he burned quite mesmeric, possibly hallucinogenic, and to what nefarious end did he use it? ('Nonsense, Jo!' cried the Doctor. 'The Master doesn't go in for homeopathic remedies.') But what about Lavinia Thrushmorton-Brown, modelesque wife to the political incumbent? Didn't she seem a bit too perfect? Her face a little too bright and waxy. Surely she was an Auton? ('If you were interested in local news,' the Doctor said reproachfully, 'you would know Mrs Thrushmorton-Brown was in an accident. The poor woman had to have extensive plastic surgery. No wonder she looks shiny.')**

Jo tried to tell herself she was seeing things, she was histrionic, she was paranoid. But it did no good when the feeling at the back of her head *itched* **and** *itched***. When all she could see was: the flower-seller at the market grinning obscenely like a criminal, his tulips opening their colourful mouths to devour (a part of her thankful they were not daffodils); the nursing home residents walking the lawn all stopped in their tracks to watch her pass by; the crows flocking to the gated entrance of Smithwood Manor, sinisterly lining the wall, waiting for some call; the stones on the hills changing places when she looked away; the fluorescents in the supermarket buzzing alarmingly as she passed, as though in secret code.**

‘Frankly, my dear Jo,’ said the Doctor when she told him her fears, ‘after all our adventures, I thought you were made of stronger stuff.’ Dismissing her he went back to grouting the tiles in the bathroom, resplendent in pink rubber gloves.

She could have thumped him she was so mad. Instead, she walked into the village, enjoying the measured stride, the hard dirt beneath her heels, knowing there would be a pleasurable ache in her legs the next day.

In the village she stopped and stared about her. She did not want to go into the pub or the corner store or the post office. All the buildings seemed to look back at her, belittle her, tell her she did not belong; she was an outsider. She went to the green – the grass shockingly bright with health, the few roses in their beds blushing hot with colour – and sat down on a swing. She let the gentle motion calm her. She knew something was wrong. She would not let the Doctor tell her otherwise. She had to prove it to him. But how?

Stuck in muddled thoughts it took Jo a moment to realise someone was sitting on the swing beside her. A young man in jeans, white shirt, green vest and casual loafers. His eyebrows were raised, accentuating wide green eyes, and a broad forehead. His hair was thinning and his cheeks were jowly. He looked like a scruffy teacher. But Jo felt sympathy pour from him.

‘You oright?’ he asked in a soft, boyish voice. Before she could answer he went on, ‘Only I was out for some sausages to cook me mam her tea,’ – he rattled the plastic bag at his feet – ‘and I saw you here all lonesome like, and I thought, there can’t be nowt in the world as bad as a pretty, sad lass, so I just couldna help myself, had to come see what’s what. But that’s me all over it is, me mam always says so, going right up to strangers and poking me nose in where it ain’t wanted. But hey, listen, I just had a thought – would ya like to come have tea with mam and me? Got loads of sausages. Always buy too much, never know if one more will do so I get another six. Whatdya say?’

Jo was so bowled over by his nervous consideration that she was shocked into silence. Then, slowly, a smile spread across her face. ‘I’m afraid I don’t eat sausages,’ she said. His face fell. ‘But if you’re making potato salad, I’m your girl.’

He beamed. 'Grand!'

She held out a hand. 'Jo Grant.'

He laughed, and shook it. 'Typical. Mam always on at me forgetting me manners.' He smoothed his hair back. 'Alan. Smithee.'

'Lovely to meet you, Alan.'

He stood, stilling the swing. 'It ain't far, coupla streets thataway.' He picked up his shopping and froze.

'What's wrong?' Jo asked.

He glanced at her and his eyebrows went up. 'Might need a quick trip to the store, Jo.' He licked his lips, embarrassed. 'For some taters.'

She found herself laughing. It felt like the first time in weeks.

After that first dinner, where he delighted her with his self-deprecating wit and nerdy charm, and Jo felt anxiety fall away to be replaced with the sudden deep pleasure of friendship, Alan was her first port of call every morning. She rang the bell of 10 Pembroke Lane and waited for him to open the door, smiling his foolish, lovely smile, as though everything were right with the world.

He took her tramping over the green hills, clambering over fences, across fields of waist-high grass and spring flowers, into the woods where bluebells spread like weed, and there he laid a gingham rug so they could picnic on tuna sandwiches and olives, and bring out a thermos of tea which they took turns to drink from the lid, when he neglected to bring mugs. He took her to the movies to see *The Man Who Fell to Earth,* **jumping when Bowie's character was revealed as an alien. 'Didn't his eyes terrify ya?' he asked. Jo was non-committal.**

One day he suggested a trip and he took the dustcover off his mam's old cream Volvo and they both laughed joyously when it started with a single twist of the key. They drove with the top down, Jo wearing large tortoiseshell glasses, feeling giddy as a schoolgirl, loving the wind in her hair. They ended up in Dungeness, the bleak end of the world, walking over the stony beach, passing rusting tractors and rotting dinghies and lobster pots. Jo had a strange sense of déjà vu at the vision of the nuclear power station, incongruous and embarrassed on

the tidal flats. Alan kicked off his shoes and encouraged her to do so too, and they paddled in the frothing water. Later, she beachcombed, sifting the sands for bright, chipped shells and bits of bladderwrack and silky driftwood, showing her prizes to him – 'Look at this. Mother of pearl. Why do they call it that?' – and he bent down and kissed her, and she was shocked at his darting tongue, but then she kissed back, taking his face in her hands, enjoying the moment, yet parting quickly as propriety took her, giving him a gentle, hopeful smile.

She wanted him to meet the Doctor. But when they drove up to the manor all was quiet. While Alan stared, impressed at the slothful grandeur of the house, Jo went out into the back garden to find the TARDIS gone, only a square imprint in the soil. Her heart leapt into her mouth, thinking selfishly of the adventures the Doctor might be having without her. Then she quietened: he had not stranded her; she was in her own time, she was perfectly capable of travelling back to London and UNIT HQ. He would come back.

She found a note stuck to the fridge with a ladybird magnet. It took her a moment to decipher his spidery writing.

'Jo, dashed off for a small trip to 1935 for some first editions. Back soon. Dinner in the fridge.'

When she opened the fridge she found a salmon on a plate staring back at her, garnished with lemon wedges and fronds of dill. A further note was pinned to it with detailed cooking instructions.

Alan found her shaking her head. 'Blimey!' he said, coming in from his tour. 'This place is bigger on the inside. It's like summat out of three centuries all cobbled together. Dya really live 'ere?'

Jo gave a sheepish smile. 'It's more of a holiday home, really.'

Alan breathed in slowly then let it out. 'This friend of yours…'

'I'm afraid he's gone.'

'On holiday?'

She nodded sheepishly. 'But he kindly left us dinner.' She opened the fridge to show him.

'What a beauty,' he said. 'Be almost a shame to et her.'

Jo beamed at his sympathy. She licked her lips, gave him the innocent eye, 'Anyway, I'm not that hungry. Are you?' He shook his head. 'Perhaps just some champagne, then.'

She plucked out a bottle of Bollinger.

They spent the night in the library, taking down books and reading alternate random passages, giggling at strange associations, sipping champagne from coupes, getting tiddly. When Jo discovered the dusty globe in the corner opened on a hinge to reveal a drinks cabinet replete with gin, sherry and whiskeys old enough to be labelled as great-great-great-great, Alan insisted they switch their drinks.

'Oh no, I can't drink whiskey,' protested Jo. 'I shouldn't even be drinking champagne.'

Alan laughed. 'Well, me heads in a right state already, so tomorra mornin's gonna be special.' And he poured amber into two cut glass tumblers.

As Alan handed her a glass Jo watched the liquid swirl, as though it had some unknowable intent. She determined to show him what she was made of. She rolled it, sniffed the smoked, oily aroma, then downed it in one.

Alan's mouth fell open.

Jo's eyes twinkled. 'Didn't I tell you? Daddy has a very exclusive club in Whitehall.'

'Ya little minx,' he said, and swilled the drink back. But he swallowed oddly and a cough came out, and Jo had to pat him on the back to stop his choking.

Then she found the record player, hidden in an alcove she had never noticed. Beside it was a leather box of vinyl. She sifted through the albums, through Beethoven, Chopin, Bach and Schubert; trawling through the treasure to find Coltrane, Duke Pearson, Elvis, The Beatles, fastening on a cover she knew well, of a denim crotch – the Rolling Stones' *Sticky Fingers*. She was surprised and excited the Doctor had this in his collection. Or had it been added by one of his many companions? She slipped the record out, placed it on the turntable, pressed the buttons to make it play, started the amplifier's

glow. With a rude burst Mick Jagger swaggered in their ears. Alan did an impression of the singer's twitchy moves which had Jo laughing. They danced to the end of side A, coming together for the slower numbers, then, exhausted, fell onto the soft leather couch. Alan poured more whiskey.

'Not too much. I don't want the Doctor to come back and find us blatted.'

Jo's heart was slowly calming in her chest. Her head was delightfully fuzzy. All worries sent far away. Her mind latched onto the word – worries – and, all of a sudden, she thought of Harry in the corner store with his face hanging open, winking with transistors. Had she seen that? Or was it something she'd read? She was reading a lot of strange science fiction lately, dog-eared paperbacks with lurid covers she found piled high in the TARDIS library.

Alan got up to stop the whispering needle, and put on some Pink Floyd. Its hypnotic quality made Jo sleepy. When Alan sat down again, she fell against him. He paused for a second, shocked, then relaxed. She settled in underneath his arm which he draped around her neck.

'Alan?' she said, hoping her voice wasn't slurring.

'Yes, Jo?'

'Have you ever noticed… well, strange things happening, in the village, I mean?' She felt him tense. 'You have.' She sat up so she could look at him.

For a second he wouldn't meet her eyes. She frowned. 'What's wrong?'

He looked crestfallen, as though what he was about to say would ruin the pleasurable evening. He took a deep breath then let it out.

'Jo, I want to be honest wit ya.' He swallowed. 'This house, it may want to look old but it ain't. Oh it may've been built some decades ago, but I notice things, I do. There's a toaster in the kitchen that's whacky as an alien gadget in the pictures, and your fridge, Jo, it gives out ice from some kinda hole in the door! Your record collection has bands I never 'eard of – Bananarama, Prince; and what sort of name is Duran Duran? - and no wonder, the dates on the sleeves are years in the

future. And then there's you and ya friend.' He stopped, giving her a smile. 'I read the note – off to 1935. What the heck? And you don't think nuthin' of it, just give a smile and carry on like it was some job or summat. Cause really you're from the future, ain't ya? Tha's it? And this place is like some museum of all the things you pick up on ya journeys.'

Alarmed as she was by Alan's insight, Jo felt she had to let him down. 'No, Alan. This is just a house, used by many people. And this is my time. I live here, now, in 1973.' She let that sink in. 'But I do travel in time. With my best friend. Who's off in 1935, or more likely on some alien planet toppling a dictator or ruining a villain's careful plan. Or in a terrible pickle, needing my help.'

But Alan did not goggle. He looked keenly at her, gauging the truth. Jo twigged to his non-reaction. She said, 'I've been honest with you, Alan. You said you'd be honest with me.' She placed her hand on his. 'There's more you want to tell me, isn't there?'

Alan looked at her small, finely manicured hand on his. A smile played at the corner of his lips. His eyes came up to find hers. There was understanding in them.

He grasped her hand tightly. 'Please, don't be afraid,' he said. 'But I'm one of them strange things.'

With his free hand, he reached up and peeled off his face.

He was a reptile. From the planet Arkhana. His spacecraft had crashed a year ago, the only survivors he and his brood-aunt, who was crippled from the accident. After a week's furtive surveillance, he decided they needed human skins to blend in. There was enough residual energy in the spacecraft to allow for their creation. Seeing humans needed places of abode and comfort he picked a cottage and encouraged its occupants to leave by showing them his teeth. They settled in, and he watched the world outside the windows. After a time, since no one bothered them, he went out and discovered what humans did – shopping for food, walking their dogs, playing Frisbee with their children in the park, going to darts at the pub, drinking and swearing and vomiting. He thought: what a dull lot they are. Then he heard his first song. He was in the pub for a pint (having found a liking for the loamy taste of Guinness), minding his own business, when a song came

on the jukebox, sinuous and creeping as a vine into his head. He had to ask what it was. The publican looked at him oddly. 'It's them Beatles, innit, wit their hippy music. Mind, this un's a good tune.' Alan peered into the jukebox to see: *Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds***. Thereafter he was a regular at the tiny record store on the main street, squeezed into the single, cramped, dusty room on the ground floor of a terrace. It smelled of smoke and dust and camphor, which the owner, Burt, used to liberally sprinkle in corners to discourage silverfish. Burt, a weedy little fellow in a fawn threadbare cardigan who smoked a pipe, didn't begrudge Alan spending hours listening to his records. He liked the boy's enthusiasm for everything he heard. So he spent the days listening to music of all kinds, and the evenings reading all the books he could to educate himself, and looking after his brood-aunt, whose injuries left her confined to a wheelchair, and whom he discovered was better known to all as his mam.**

Soon he began to notice strange things about the townsfolk. Some of them would look at him knowingly, as though they could see through the skin to his green scales beneath. He thought he heard sounds, inhuman sounds, at a register only an alien could hear. He thought he glimpsed flashes of things – a candy store suddenly inhabited by two orange blobby monsters, a weightlifter in the window of the local sports centre turning into a grotesque, hairy green ape, a family swimming at the local pool changed into devilish sea creatures. No one had asked questions for six whole months. Then, one day, there was a knock at the door.

He cautiously opened it, finding a tiny, elderly Asian woman in a smart green pant suit grinning up at him behind thick bottle glasses.

'Hi there. Aran isn't it?' She stuck out a hand. It disappeared in his when he shook it. 'I'm Betty.' She paused. 'Can I come in for tea?'

Inside, she swung her small white-haired head side-to-side. 'Oh this is nice. Not much changed from when Charles's here, no?'

He nodded, though he didn't know who she meant.

''Mother' not home?' she asked archly.

His heart jumped at the glint in her eye. 'She's upstairs. Havin' a nap.'

‘Mmm,’ she said. ‘I got medicine for that, too. Ancient herbs. You follow my instructions, yes?’

‘Sorry,’ he said, ‘But what-’

‘Earl Grey do fine!’ she snapped and walking into the sitting room plonked herself on the sofa. She frowned at its softness, rubbing at a stain.

He made the tea quickly, not wanting to leave her alone a second more than he had to. When the floor above creaked he knew his aunt was awake, listening to every sound. He poured water into an old brown pot, grabbed two misshapen pottery mugs from the cupboard, scrummaged for some arrowroot biscuits in the tin, and threw it all together on a tray.

When he returned to the room, Betty was sitting straight-backed on the edge of the sofa, holding a pamphlet. Her eyes followed his every movement – putting down the tray, sitting back, suddenly reaching forward to take a biscuit. Nibbling to hide his worry. Since she spent a minute saying nothing, only looking at him intently, he poured the tea. Realised he’d forgotten the milk. Went to rise.

‘It OK,’ she said, stopping him. ‘I drink it brack. Rike my heart.’ There was an uncomfortable pause. Then she cackled like a raven. She stopped abruptly. Leaned forward. The movement enticed him to copy her.

‘We hope you settled now, yes?’

‘Yes,’ he replied warily.

‘Good. Everyone need time. After bad accident, you need more time.’

He frowned. ‘What do you know -’

‘Big spaceship, green, like you under suit. Everybody see it.’

He wanted her gone. Now. His eyes flickered.

She put her hands out, old hands with many jewelled rings. ‘No, do not be aflaid. I here to help.’ She grinned and her whole face turned into a smile. Her eyes blinked a number of times behind her glasses.

Alan was shocked. She'd communicated to him in his own language.

'Solly if I get wrong. Take many weeks to get brinks right. Take many months to find species.'

He was flabbergasted – at her knowing what he was, at her effort to speak to him, at her reason for being here. 'Why now?' he asked.

With another grin she explained. There was a reason why people saw strange things in the village. It held all manner of aliens, be they insects or silver robots or blood-sucking rocks. She nodded at him: 'Or gleen reptiles from planet Arkhana.' The village was a haven for anyone from outer space who had crashed, who was ostracised from their kind, who may have been defeated after an attempt to invade the Earth, or who simply found the planet quite a nice place to spend a few days, or months, or years. It was protected by a very powerful and mysterious alien who lived in an old, brooding manor called Smithwood on the outskirts of the village.

She finished her tea, smacked her lips, and handed him the pamphlet. 'This exprain everything.' Then, handing him the promised herbs for his mother, she was gone.

Alan, overwhelmed, sat on the sofa, drank the last of the tea, and read the rather lurid booklet Betty had left for him. He felt as though he may have just joined a cult.

'… Hold on,' said Jo, when he finished his story. 'This place,' she gestured to the room, the books, the scattered record sleeves about them, 'this is your old, brooding manor. This is Smithwood.' She shook her head. 'Which means…' Jo rolled her eyes. 'The Doctor knew about this village all the time! No wonder he was trying to persuade me there was nothing to investigate. Oh that man! When he gets back I'll…'

Jo realised that Alan was silent beside her. Watching her with his yellow eyes. His green scales were luminescent in the chandelier light. The record had finished, the needle hissing static. He still had hold of her hand.

'You ain't afraid,' he said.

Jo gazed sympathetically at him. 'Oh, Alan, I've seen some scary things in my travels. You're not one of them.'

He squeezed her hand. She smiled.

‘Do you think?’ he started. ‘That a reptile and -’

‘- a human,’ she continued. ‘Might…’

They regarded one another seriously, aware of the import of their question.

‘Shall we see?’ he said, pulling her up from the couch.

‘One small step for womankind,’ said Jo with a cheeky smile.

They went upstairs to the attic bedroom.

In the morning, Jo woke to an empty bed. For a moment she was disoriented, blissfully unattached. Then her senses righted themselves. She felt warm and sleepy, a feeling of pleasure ran through her that tingled her to her toes.

A flush of water from the pipes in the walls told her Alan was in the bathroom.

She raised the sheets and looked at herself, wondrous at what she’d done. Nothing different, just the same curves, the same parts. What would her father think of her? Come to that, what would the Doctor think, fraternising with aliens? But it was a daily occurrence for him, and he was always tempting her with other worlds, encouraging her to immerse herself in alien cultures. Though his was an academic view; he certainly wouldn’t have suggested going to bed with them. But what better way to so immediately befriend someone, and wasn’t sleeping with someone freely, without tensions or anxieties, what they struggled for in the sixties?

Gosh, she thought, such philosophy before breakfast.

She kicked off the coverlet and padded naked to the bathroom. Alan had showered and was standing before the mirrored cabinet. He was smoothing down the edges of his face with Ponds cold cream. Jo wrapped her arms around him, smelling his fresh, warm skin.

‘What shall we do today? Shall we have a picnic?’ she asked.

Alan smiled. ‘That’s a grand idea. And I have just the place.’

Jo peered around his shoulder at his reflection. 'Oh?'

'Miss Josephine Grant, would ya do me the honour -' she took a breath - 'of seein' inside me spaceship?'

He took her to an empty field and casually, using a remote control he fished from a pocket, revealed a doorway in the side of his invisible ship, and gestured her inside.

The flight deck was covered in brass knobs and woodwork and studded chrome levers. The walls soft coloured stone that flared with warm light when Alan touched controls. A not unpleasant green gloom suffused the small craft.

Jo tried to show more enthusiasm than she felt. Truthfully, she'd seen more impressive space craft. She remembered the Axon ship made of organic material, with its shifting psychedelic colours, or the frightening bright pink plastic corridors of the Nestene ship, replete with thousands of Autons ready to lurch from their sarcophagi. But she smiled and oohed over the quaint antique design, and Alan appeared pleased at her excitement.

They spread the picnic on the stone floor, and reclined, and it was not at all strange to be lunching in a broken alien spacecraft. It felt, to Jo, utterly truthful, and more real than anything she had done of late. Alan went to the console and pushed some buttons. After a burst of static, a squall of guitar peeled into the ship. It took a moment for Jo to recognise it. Bowie's *Hang On to Yourself*. They abandoned the meal and danced.

Afterward, Alan typed quickly into a pearl keyboard, and a hologram of a green tropical globe appeared, floating between them. 'My planet,' he explained, a sad catch in his voice.

'Why don't you go home?' Jo asked.

He motioned to the controls. 'They look oright, but they may as well be cardboard, much use they are.'

He reached out to touch a lever. There was such tenderness in the gesture that Jo felt sympathy rise. An idea came suddenly to her.

She touched him on the shoulder. 'I think I may be able to help. I

know someone who can get anything, anything at all.'

His brow furrowed. 'Jo, these parts, they're, well, you canna just find 'em in a car boot sale.'

She would not let him down. 'Trust me,' she said. 'Now write me a list.'

She didn't know how he did it, but Harry had his contacts. Almost everything she wanted he found. Even if he did grumble about its rarity. For those items even he could not procure, Jo hatched an elaborate but successful plan. The Doctor had not yet returned from his travels, which, oddly, did not worry her. And yet, she often felt presences in the house, as though it was inhabited by ghosts from the past and future. Sometimes, drifting off to sleep at night in Alan's arms, she thought she heard the TARDIS, and would start violently awake. But she could never find the blue box in her investigations. What she did discover was the changing notes on the fridge door. They were never the same as the day before. Realising this was a message system, she decided to use it. She wrote Alan's list out in clear print, so nothing could be misconstrued, and then she added a date when it was required. To be kind, she shifted it three days into the future.

Three days later she walked into the kitchen to find, on the bench, four plastic shopping bags full of every part she'd asked for.

When she presented them to Alan, he exclaimed, 'Jesus, Jo! Per'aps I betta give ya a list a everythin' I want.'

So she spent the next week making repairs to his spaceship, Alan instructing her on which strange mechanical parts connected, and where to plug in wires, his hands on her hands, often breaking off the work to indulge in one another. Spending the nights in the soothing green light that made her naked skin appear as alien as his.

Then, too fast, too soon, it was done, and he was ready to go.

He collected his mother from the cottage and installed her in a suspended animation chamber, for the journey to Arkhana was hundreds of years. His hands played over the renewed, blinking instruments with a telling eagerness. Jo could not help but be hurt by his disregard of her feelings. Yet she understood his desire to be where he belonged. So many times she had felt the same, those moments she

was imperilled on another world. She did the best she could to let him go kindly.

'Well, safe trip,' she said, trying to be stoic.

'Oh Josephine Grant,' he replied, enfolding her in a hug. 'There will be stories of your greatness on Arkhana, of that I can assure ya.'

He kissed her, and then he turned away and walked into his thrumming spaceship. The door closed, the engines revved, and then, abruptly, out of nowhere came the sound of music. Jo smiled when she recognised it.

Something in the way she moves

Attracts me like no other lover…

You softie, she thought.

He turned off his invisibility shield so she could see: see, as the sleek shape rose into the cloudless sky, see as the jets burned, as the air became hot, as the wind tossed her hair, as, with slow reluctance, Alan's beautiful antique spacecraft that she had helped put back together, disappeared into the heavens.

She cried for a day, spending it in the library, finding all the books they'd read together, playing The Rolling Stones over and over and over until she was exhausted by her melancholy.

She woke to find the Doctor seated beside her on the lounge, reading John Donne. 'Ah, Jo,' he said happily. 'I've brought back an utterly superb Gruyere from 1531. Made by the monks of Monmelo, you know. Should make the best omelette you've ever tasted. That is, if you're ready for breakfast?' He peered at her with familial concern.

Everything she wanted to say to him melted in that look. Why ask questions? Why drag up events that only hurt? She'd write it all out in her memoirs, a salacious book that would no doubt be vetted by the official secrets act. It was enough that the Doctor, the most important alien in her life, and her friend, was here, now, offering her breakfast. While, somewhere in space, an alien ship, housing a beautiful, intelligent, witty reptile, travelled hundreds of years into the future, blaring rock 'n' roll into the dark.

The Last Doctor

Paul Cornell

The old man stood on the hill and looked up at the night sky. He'd been right to climb up here, despite how it had hurt his knees and back.

There were no stars.

There were no clouds. He knew where stars should remain. He knew by his learning and in his bones. Those stars were gone. They had been the last.

He'd known this was likely. But he was still frightened.

He looked back down to the town in the valley. There the lights still shone. He'd connected the electrical grid to his ship. In the year since he came here, he'd connected just about everything to his ship.

He felt absurdly old, suddenly. Implausibly old. To have such responsibility. To have taken it on. When he should be retired, enjoying... something. Something other than what he'd had all his life. Something that a part of his mind had always sought and never really got.

A holiday.

He smiled at that. But it wasn't a good smile. After a moment, he let it go.

'Hello?' the voice came from the trail behind him, and he realised, annoyed at himself, that there'd been another reason he'd come up here. The stars, after all, would have failed to show themselves above the peak in a few hours. Not all those he sought had been faint enough to be obscured by the electric lights.

(He'd given them such bright lights. Once upon a time, he'd given them fire.)

He'd come up here to be alone.

But now that felt absurd too, a selfish waste of time. ‘Yes,’ he called back, ‘hullo there, Amarta.’

She came into sight at the turn of the path. She wasn’t even breathing hard. She was the same light green and brown all humanity was now, her family name, Sar, giving no clue whether her distant ancestors had spent ten thousand years in Norway or Nigeria. Amarta was sixteen, the Mayor’s daughter. She was due to be married to someone eight feet tall and furred from head to foot, whose distant ancestors hadn’t been on Earth at all. The old man had wondered, in the last year, if the relationships in the town were being put under too much pressure by the situation they were in. But, at least for the last few centuries, he’d become the sort of person who always questioned his own certainties, and so he wasn’t apt to ask Amarta if she’d chosen someone as comforting as Das because now they were all seeking comfort.

‘Are they still there?’ she asked.

‘You worked out why I came up here. Good. No. They’re not.’

She paused for a moment, weighing up her fear. ‘How long have we got?’

‘I don’t know exactly.’

‘But now you can find out.’

He’d wondered if he’d been going to do so before she’d mentioned it, if he really wanted to deform their lives even further by knowing. But now she’d asked, it was obvious. ‘Yes,’ he said. ‘Now I can.’

They walked through the snow-covered streets of the town. The temperature had been dropping every year, as energy leaked to... well, who knew where it was going? Into the flaw. The flaw that had holed this universe below the waterline and sealed it off, leading to the rending and dissolution of great continents of spacetime. They had watched one night, almost all of them, as a nearby star cluster, high in the sky, a welcome winter decoration of this world for centuries, had, as the old man had predicted it would, suddenly shifted into the red and vanished. Silently. The space it had been in had fallen away from the dimensional architecture that had supported it. They had heard, via hyperspace link, the cries of horror and despair from other

colonies, from other inhabited worlds beyond.

That had been when they were still in communication with other inhabited worlds.

When there had still been other inhabited worlds.

When there had still been hyperspace through which to talk to them.

It felt apt that this should happen in winter. Not that winter meant anything to the wider cosmos. The old man had been seized by many worries and doubts in the last year, and currently he was dogged by the idea that he brought with him, wherever he went, not a grand perspective, as he'd always imagined in his youth, but a lack of one. He believed in winter and summer, north and south, happy and sad. He always tried to say he didn't believe in good and evil, but he knew evil when he saw it, and knew it always grew out of good. He brought these tiny beliefs, tiny against the universe, with him wherever he went. And now he'd ended up with them here, when perhaps what these people could really do with...

He looked at Amarta walking determinedly beside him, and hated himself for thinking it. When what they could do with was either some comforting description of absolute mechanical acceptance, or some comforting lie of absolute denial. Some of his old enemies had marched to their doom in this universe logically, methodically, without fear or anger. Some had gone screeching defiance and shooting into the dark in all directions.

But all he had instead were his little lies. 'How apt this should happen in winter!' As if there was apt. As if there was winter. As if there were anything but this.

He should have been better. He should have tried harder, somehow.

As if he was the hero of this story. As if it was obviously up to him to save the universe, and that he'd somehow, incredibly, just for once, missed his chance this time, but another must surely come along.

That was how he'd acted, all his life. As if it had been up to him. Him now not being able to felt like a lesson. That was being taught to him, of course. That he wouldn't learn until the last moment. When

he'd taken everyone else with him.

He felt like yelling, just yelling, as he walked.

His frustration with himself often boiled over into anger. He knew it. He was telling more and more jokes. Smiling at children. Trying to be liked. As if they might start to think this was his fault. Well, being people, they might yet. 'You know,' he said now, 'I once asked Schrödinger about the end of the universe. I'd located him at a dinner party. I wanted to tell him that he could have his cat back if he promised not to be so cruel to it –'

'Who?'

He stopped, sighed. 'Never mind. Before your time. Like everything else.'

They came to the hall in the centre of town. The building had originally had a defensive purpose, like the outer wall, but gradually, as everyone from the scattered settlements on the planet and the few remaining ships that had made it to this system had come to live here, the wall had been left unguarded, and the hall had become the centre of a great meaningless system of barter, the town growing into tents and shacks far beyond its old limits.

It needn't have been that way. There'd nearly been a small war about letting parasitical insect creatures and carnivorous reptiles settle here. Until the old man had bellowed at that meeting that if a single one of them on any side took up arms he would take a spanner and smash his own ship and they could all die together in the cold, right now.

They entered the hall. There it stood, on the little stage at one end, which was decorated with branches and berries, where the children rehearsed for the carol concert in the evenings. It looked at home there. The pantomime prop. The peeling paint. Thin cables led through the open door, feeding power and structure to the town and the world beyond, moment by moment.

It wouldn't save them. He'd told them it wouldn't. All it did was buy them time.

If he could, he'd have put them all in it, and taken eight hundred

chattering and yelling fools away from here.

But there was nowhere to go.

Amarta followed him inside. He left the door open these days. He'd locked off any dangers, and he liked to come in here and find small children running about, pulling levers which wouldn't do anything, hiding in all the nooks and crannies. He played the scowling old wizard to them sometimes. But they'd found him out, as children did.

He went to the relevant instruments, and felt the old thrill as they came to life for him. He asked the question of his poor old ship, aware that for it, what was happening must be like gradually being buried alive. He spoke gently. The ship told him the answer.

He thought about concealing it from Amarta. But he knew she would find him out too. Her face reminded him of... everybody. All she was a descendant of. 'Two weeks and a day,' he said. 'Until the night of Christmas.'

Apt, again. Cruel. Like a story.

She nodded, bravely taking it in. Then he realised she was crying anyway.

They brought forward the wedding, to the very next day, in fact. The old man organised the reception, gave the couple all the treats he could: unleavened bread and some of the last of the wine. He sat beside Reverend Auster Trelaw, the old man and the old woman together, and both kept peaceful smiles on their faces as almost everyone danced, wildly and too drunkenly already. The Mayor had talked to a number of Das' relatives, and they were going to do their best to make sure nobody got hurt.

The old man had told the Mayor the date of the final day, and he had announced it immediately. It had come as a relief to many. They'd known for months there would be such a date. There were no riots. The town was too small for the anonymity that would have allowed that.

There was just a great deep breath in, an increase of tension, the start of the shout on the roller coaster, at the edge of the drop.

The old man and the old woman walked home together, to the townhouse that the old man shared with three families. Trelaw slept in a tent in the church now, having given up her house. She belonged to the Fourth Adjusted Church of Chiro. She had once tried to explain its lineage to the old man, but he'd kept saying he'd known various people involved and it hadn't been like that, until finally she'd asked why he assumed she cared.

As the last summer had become the last autumn, they'd spent a lot of what little free time they had together. They had sat under trees and read to each other. They had kept themselves limber with long walks to check the furthest instruments, deep in the woods. They had taken to sharing a bed when it was silly to walk all that way back. And every now and then they had shared something more.

'You're a source of great pain to me, you know,' said the old man now, as they walked.

'You too,' she said fondly back to him.

'Because of you, I'm in the world, to the last.'

'Oh. You mean that otherwise you'd just get in that machine of yours and close the door until there was nothing left outside?'

He was silent.

'Rubbish,' she said. 'Don't blame me. There's a whole list, from Amarta downwards, and if not them, you'd find a random stranger to care about, and I'm surprised at you, because you don't normally lie to yourself, not for a second.'

'No,' he said, 'it's all I've done -' And then he couldn't talk for a moment.

'What keeps you going,' she said, 'is *not* a lie.'

'You would say that, wouldn't you?' The old argument had let him find his voice.

'Don't start.'

'I'm... very frightened. I don't want to leave you.'

‘I don’t either.’

‘Why aren’t *you* afraid?’

‘I am. But I don’t want to let the side down. You see bursts of it, public mischief, but there always seems to be someone who says stop, let’s not go out like this. It’s like there’s someone watching, eh?’

‘Now don’t *you* start.’

‘I reserve the right to keep starting things,’ she said. And she held him by the lapels, and started something again there and then.

He didn’t sleep very much now. He slept in the afternoons, when his body forced him to. The nights troubled him.

But thanks to his dearest, he slept that night.

He woke in the early hours, and that wasn’t so surprising, but this time there was a strange noise in the room.

No, a familiar noise. One he hadn’t heard for a long time.

A wheezing, groaning sound.

And suddenly, there stood someone at the end of the bed, surrounded in blue light. His clothes were ashes, and his features were burnt. But his eyes were still bright, and he looked down at the old man, teeth bared, furious with him. Furious but helpless. As always.

The glow cut out, and the figure fell.

The old man crouched beside him as Trelaw ran for medical help.

The figure’s hands convulsed in the air, like he was making a pitiful grab for the old man’s throat. ‘I used... all the energy...’ he hissed, ‘of a galaxy, before it fell. It pushed me across... the last stepping stones of space and time...’

The old man tried to hush him.

‘You can’t be the last. *I’m* the last. I will show them -‘

And he died. Not gently. The last cry caught in his throat.

They held the funeral the next day. On the hard frosted ground.

That took digging. Nobody said, with the cold, with so little time left, why bother.

‘I wanted to say about him,’ said the old man, over the grave, ‘that he believed in himself. But not even that. I’m... glad that his hatred of me gave him something to live for.’ And he dropped a handful of soil that was like stones onto the body.

He’d investigated, obviously, had examined where he’d appeared, talked to his ship about the spectrum of that glow.

But there was nothing to indicate that it wasn’t a one way trip.

He’d considered, once, taking everyone here back in time: leaving them on some empty world, so at least they’d be spared. But then he’d thought: they would have descendents, different people would arrive here, someone would always end up here at this moment. And if he himself fled to live in the past, they’d be without him.

He’d started to work on it anyway, only to find that the bridges that connected present to past had fallen away, that there wasn’t a way back now.

He couldn’t go back now, and break all the laws to stop this happening, even if he did manage to find out what it was.

Trelaw thought it might be another universe colliding with this one, at a higher dimensional level. The old man had tried to contact any of the great powers that lived amongst such things, but to no avail.

In those last cold dark two weeks, Amarta excitedly announced she was pregnant, which everyone, including the father, knew to be impossible.

‘I just know,’ she said. ‘With Christmas approaching, this is what it all means, this is what we’ve been waiting for. This is going to save us! Somehow.’

Trelaw had closed her eyes and tried to find something to say and had finally left the room, shaking her head. Which had left Amarta looking lost and furious.

‘I’m sorry,’ said the old man, taking her hands, ‘but it can’t be.’ The distance between species still meant something. Biology had,

cruelly, not been suspended alongside physics. The old man listened to Amarta deny it and deny it, insisting that something impossible would save them.

Insisting, still, on a story.

Trelaw didn't mention the apparent miracle from the pulpit. Everyone in her church was talking about it, mostly unbelieving. There were more believers in this amongst those that didn't come. The old man said to her that she seemed sad to see the numbers in her church grow. She replied that love wasn't love when you had a gun to your head.

They all became aware, as the last week approached, that something odd was happening to their perceptions of time and space. The old man found himself in long rooms, whispering to people in the distance. He woke at the bottom of a pit. He walked with the long dead, of his acquaintance, and there were so many of them, and they were merry company, and wanted to draw him away. Until he made himself turn his back on them, and refused to retreat into such comfort.

Some of the townsfolk did accept this senile mercy. Many didn't. The dreamers took to their beds. The others took to staying awake. Blessed sleep had gone over to the enemy.

On the night before Christmas, the sun crept low into the sky, rolled along the hills, then vanished behind them once more.

As it had been in the beginning, in the heart of winter, so it would be in the end.

'Well,' said the old man, 'here we are.'

He was standing in the little hall, Trelaw and the Mayor beside him. They were here to stage warm traditions in the last cold place. The children, in the wings, were ready to walk on, already hushing each other and stretching and sneezing and bumping into things and complaining and asking questions. Like they would have lives after. Those old enough to remember last year were wondering why Christmas had got mixed up with something sad. All of them were angry at this thing they didn't understand. Very few of them had had anything explained to them. Nobody could seem to find words that told hope for the future that there was no hope.

The audience was just about everybody. Even the sleepers. They had come to hear their children sing.

The Mayor nodded to the old man. He'd prepared something to say, the old man knew, about this not being the moment for strident announcements or loud debates. But it hadn't needed to be said.

The old man went to sit at the piano, and watched as the children marched onstage, some of them swinging their arms extravagantly, little soldiers. All sorts of species. Different ages that approximated the same stage of growth. Different sizes. Doing something, on this last night, alien traditions, just because.

He played what might be called carols from many different worlds and beliefs, his old fingers aching at the resistant keys of a piano that could no longer be tuned, that hadn't been in great shape even before the universe had warped its strings.

He finished with 'Oh Little Town of Bethlehem'.

At the end of the concert, the Mayor thanked the audience for everything. He asked them for calm. He said there was to be no further organised gathering. That he expected everyone to make their own arrangements, with dignity.

Trelaw whispered to the old man that she desperately wanted to say something about suicide, to plead with anyone who was thinking about it not to –

But the hall began to empty as she made herself get to her feet, and in the end she just shook her head and sat down again.

Amarta made her way back to the two of them after the hall had emptied.

She looked horrified. Suddenly mourning.

Their first sight of the horror that was now going to raise itself more and more and more out of the plummet that stood before them. She gave them a glimpse of the size of it. That was coming now.

'There's no baby,' she whispered. 'I... knew. I... lied. I'm sorry.'

And she ran from the hall.

They couldn't find her to comfort her.

'The hopes and fears,' Trelaw said, as they walked to the old man's house, 'of all the years, are met in thee tonight.'

'Yes.'

'What are you going to do? At the end?'

'I don't know.'

'Die, I suppose.' It sounded odd in her voice.

'Oh, that's the last thing I'll do.'

She swore at him.

'Have you heard,' he said, 'of the theory, and this is so large and so odd that it's never been disproved, but has just sat there, since it was first thought of, in the Twentieth Century, making people look away from it...' He looked up into the darkness.

'What theory?'

'The idea that the universe is very like a black hole. Holographic in nature. That everything that has ever happened, all our experiences, our whole minds, every single piece of data, is recorded in solid form, remembered, trapped in amber at the event horizon. That time, as we experience it, is just the needle playing our consciousness, one of many songs on an old record.'

'There's an elderly metaphor.'

'What do you make of it?'

'It sounds like an afterlife to me. It sounds like what Plato saw, illuminating the wall of his cave, making the shadows that are our reality. It's what people have often suspected, and described in different ways. But that's just people. Just another story. It's probably not true. But if only it was.'

'You think?'

She looked surprised at the sound in his voice. 'It scares you.'

‘Our whole existences, sitting there, contemplating each other, or being contemplated by who knows what? Without change, or travel, or a new idea? It *terrifies* me.’

‘More than death?’

‘Much more.’

‘You,’ she said, taking his arm, ‘fell from heaven. It’s understandable you don’t want to go back.’

They lay with each other again. They were pleased that the noises they heard from outside were songs and even laughter, and the sounds of pleasure.

‘It feels like the last important thing,’ she said in the darkness, just a voice now. ‘That there aren’t screams and gunfire and rape. Some of that is down to you. Your influence.’

‘And you.’

‘I feel like going house to house, making sure nobody kills their children.’

‘I already did.’

‘Of course you did.’

In the end, they couldn’t help but go to sleep. It was what mammals did.

The old man woke in darkness, and knew the darkness now was there for him.

Outside was silence. It was strangely warm. It was near to midnight.

He looked beside him.

His dearest was gone.

He held his expression still. He didn’t let himself cry out. Although he felt sure now that there was nobody left to hear him.

There was just the dark, all around. A line of light from the door. A line that was all that was left.

Something fell away beside him.

He leapt up with a shout. He looked back for a moment, into the darkness where his dearest had been.

The darkness drew nearer to him again, suddenly, comfortably, like the calm outside the lamp on any winter's night near any human fire.

He considered staying and letting it take him.

But he could not be that man. Not at the end.

Not *ever.*

He found he was smiling. A good smile. At last.

He turned and ran for the door.

The line of light was like a bridge, over nothing and from nothing. It led to the hall in the middle of what was no longer the town. The old man could see his machine there, sustaining the light, its last hope.

And then, the bridge led elsewhere, changed by a sudden idea of the old man, and the machine fell away, its sides collapsing in on itself, and then it was just lines that flexed away into the dark and vanished.

It had given itself for his last wish.

He gathered his strength and ran.

The light led to the hillside. Because the hillside was all there was left.

'If energy can drop into the flaw,' the old man yelled, because he might as well talk to himself now, 'then perhaps it can be pulled from it again!'

He did the equations in his head as he ran. He said them out loud, as if they might be incantations that could change the shape of things on their own.

But he knew they failed. That they led to chains of zeroes. Wait, zeroes!

'A zero point device,' he gasped, 'as the last researchers were

working on, to take energy from the quantum foam!' He scrabbled in his pockets, only to find that he was wearing his dressing gown. And so he found only a piece of string and an apple and a marble.

He spent a moment juggling them desperately, running through the ways these three things might make a device for which the theory had never been thought of.

He could not find a way.

He threw the marble at the dark and bit into the apple and threw that too and kept running.

'If you mapped the dimensions of the universe onto an imaginary one, that I imagined-!'

He estimated the strength of psionic force required and realised it was too much.

'The chord of my dressing gown, if I could somehow make a wormhole, fling it in, across to another universe -!'

But how could his mere flesh do that?

He had nothing.

But he ran on. Shouting his ideas at the dark.

He ran onto the hillside, and turned quickly, and realised he was on the last land, that the dark was spiralling up beneath him, that he was on the last high point over nothing, and that now he could see nothing rushing in from all sides. That his machine, or the love of the universe for its most troubling son, had made him a privileged observer of the last moments.

The last moment.

Now.

He held up his hands and willed them to make something. He grabbed at the thin air.

He roared at the darkness.

The darkness rushed at him.

‘Wait,’ he cried, ‘I’ve got an idea!’

The event horizon of the universe was.

It shone and did not. It had no colour. There were no other colours to compare it to. It always was. It was never not. It did not have always and never. It held time and space and all memory. It loved all memory. Memory didn’t know it.

And that was that.

Or... it had been that.

Suddenly, there was a had been.

And then, there was a then.

And then a moment after.

Something had happened.

Something detached itself.

It looked at the event horizon, and was itself. And it liked that. What?! It *loved* that. Oh, and it loved an event horizon! But it couldn’t be *part* of that. Not quite. Though it sort of wanted to be.

But -

And with a sudden bloom –

A new *everything*.

And something whirling off into it.

It had started something.

Again.

In winter.

Doctor Who and the Mytex Power

Stephen Cole, aged 11

Chapter One

It was a sleepy planet, the inhabitants were very peaceful, and no one had arrived to pollute or devastate the planet.

Until the Mytex Power came.

From the planet Isocelous, this terrible energy force enslaved the planet, turning the inhabitants evil.

Supported by his machinery, he enslaved the inhabitants. No one could stand up to him, and he had never been opposed or beaten.

Until the Doctor came.

The Doctor was the only person he had ever known whose brain matched his own. As his agents, the Zygons, were thwarted by the Doctor, the stranger from space, the force wanted revenge. The Traken, Nyssa, would play a big part in his vengeance…

In the TARDIS, the Time Lord known only as The Doctor was cheerfully humming 'When the Saints Come Marching In' when Nyssa, the curly-haired youth, came up to him. 'Doctor,' she said. 'Doctor, I feel so faint…'

Nyssa collapsed, unaware that this faint spell was deliberately caused, and would be the introduction to one of the Doctor's most terrifying and strangest adventures ever…

With a wheezing and groaning of ancient machinery, the square blue box appeared. Because of its relative dimensions, within the small exterior the interior was virtually limitless in size.

The door of the police box opened and the Doctor stepped out, followed by a curly-haired young lady of about 21 years of age. She was called Tegan, an Earth-woman whose curiosity had led her to the Doctor. Together they carried the prone Nyssa and laid her down on the wet grass.

The Doctor stood thoughtfully. He turned to Tegan. 'There's something wrong here, something very wrong…'

Chapter Two

Tegan, meanwhile, was trying to revive Nyssa. 'Aw, c'mon, Nyssa, wake up!' She gently slapped her face a few times without effect.

The Doctor called Tegan over. 'Hey, Tegan, look at that.'

'Look at what?'

'That creature, see it?'

'Yuk! It's not a beauty contest winner, is it!'

Indeed, the one-eyed green creature with no arms or legs was very peculiar indeed. No mouth or nose appeared, no chin, just a shape, a glob, a thing…

Behind their backs, Nyssa heard a voice inside her head.

'Awaken, Nyssa… Feel the Mytex Power surging through your brain… Let it overwhelm you, let it control you… Swear allegiance to the Power of Mytex!'

Nyssa woke. Faintly she murmured, 'Yes… I do.' She got to her feet and walked off in the opposite direction to the Doctor and Tegan. Her clothes suddenly changed to golden robes with a red belt and a red band around her head.

The creature the Doctor and Tegan were studying saw the golden figure of Nyssa and ran after it. The Doctor and Tegan turned as it did.

'Nyssa!' the Doctor cried. He ran after her with TGegan close behind, crashing through the undergrowth. 'Nyssa, come back!'

'Doctor, I've got a stitch!' said Tegan.

'We can't waste time now! These creatures chasing Nyssa could be hostile!'

Nyssa turned a corner, and when the Doctor and tegan came, she was surrounded by the aliens.

‘Nyssa, give me your hand!’ said Doctor Who. He noticed there was a cold light in Nyssa’s eyes.

‘Blast them!’ she cried.

Five beams of light shot out of the creatures’ eyes. Tegan and the Doctor crumpled to the ground.

Nyssa… no!’ croaked the Doctor, and collapsed.

There was a smile of satisfaction on Nyssa’s cold face…

Chapter Three

‘Are the prisoners dead?’ whispered the voice inside Nyssa’s head.

‘No,’ she said. ‘The Lurchoids’ opti-blasts can only stun. However…’

‘Burn them, Nyssa! Burn them!’

‘But—’

‘They must burn, Nyssa. Thery must be killed. DO IT!’

‘I swear to the Mytex Power, I shall do it immediately!’

Her face was contorted into a ghastly mask of hate, and she was surrounded by a strange yellow glow… but then that disappeared. She walked towards the prisoners. ‘Doctor, Tegan – arise!’

The Doctor obeyed but Tegan just sat there. ‘Why are you doing this Nyssa?’ she asked. ‘WHY?’

‘Because I must. Arise.’

The Doctor whispered to Tegan. ‘Get up! I think she’s obsessed by another force.’

‘Can we run?’

‘Let’s hope so. RUN!’

They both ran. Nyssa’s eyes glowed and they found they couldn’t move.

‘Nyssa, please!’ gasped the Doctor. ‘Ignore this force!’

But Nyssa just laughed. Great peels of mad, cackling laughter broke the silence. ‘Tie them up!’ she screamed madly. ‘To the stake!’

‘Nyssa, please!’ Tegan wailed.

They were brought to a stake in the ground, which was surrounded by wood and grass.

‘Set it alight!’ Nyssa cried.

Chapter Four

Nyssa wound the roped, then stood back. The Doctor and tegan’s hands were tied and they could not move.

The beams shot out of the Lurchoids’ eyes, red beams, hitting the sticks and grass. They burst into flames!

‘Aggh!’ screamed Tegan. ‘Doctor, I’m burning!’

Suddenly a Lurchoid fired at the Doctor and tegan and they both disappeared. Then he too ran off.

Nyssa, sitting on her throne, jumped up in alarm. ‘Get after them – now!’ she said.

‘But we don’t know where they’ve gone!’ said a brown Lurchoid.

‘Then follow the black one! That black Lurchoid!’

She stared at the burning stake, cold fury in her eyes.

The Master Power’s voice flowed through her brain. ‘Fool! Can you not even kill someone?’ it said angrily.

‘Sorry, oh master, but a Lurchoid prevented their deaths. I have sent a squad after it.’

‘Good… But you have failed me, and you must suffer!’

‘No! Please, no!’ yelled Nyssa. She glowed blue, her features shimmered and blurred, she looked like the negative of a photograph… Then it faded and she collapsed in a heap on the floor.

The Lurchoid that had helped the Doctor and Tegan escape now appeared in front of them.

‘Look, it’s the creature that helped us!’ said the Doctor. ‘Hello!’

The Lurchoid spoke: ‘Greetings.’

‘Why did you save us?’

‘You must be an enemy of the Master Power, so you are a friend of the rebels!’

Chapter Five

‘Rebels?’ repeated Doctor Who.

‘Yes. The Master Power is evil and we, intelligent, can only just resist his evil ways. The others, not so strong, are helplessly made to obey his command. Soon, we will rebel against him. Death to the Master Power! Death to the woman called Nyssa! And you shall help – or die!’

‘The Doctor and Tegan stared at each other helplessly.

Meanwhile, the Master Power was speaking to Nyssa.

‘These pathetic rebels are plotting to kill me! Can you imagine it? But just in case, I require physical form. I understand you have technical knowledge?’

‘That is right, oh master.’

‘Then you shall arrange it. As for the Doctor… I wish to examine his mind. I shall test my mind against his. I shall win. But however, if I lose, then this shall happen…’

‘The Master Power, what does he look like?’ asked the Doctor.

‘He has no physical form, but—’ He was cut off by a voice.

‘I have come for you, Doctor. I wish to tell you something – I want to test my mind against yours! So come!’ It was the voice of the Master Power.

‘Doctor!’ Tegan cried.

The Doctor was fading away. Again the voice rang out: 'The Power of Mytex knows no bounds!'

'The Master Power, with his evil power of Mytex, has kidnapped the Doctor. We must save him. Up the revolution!' The Lurchoids moved forwards, taking tegan. What could she do to save Nyssa? And how could she help the Doctor? Poor Tegan!

Chapter Six

The Doctor had the feeling of being half asleep, half awake, and a migraine. Then he was in a metal room, bare: no windows, dooes, no furniture, just a four-walled room.

'All is ready for your transformation, oh Master,' said Nyssa.

'Good. I would not like to keep my guest waiting… hah hah! Pull the lever and go, my faithful servant!'

Nyssa pulled the lever and left.

In a flash, the voice belonged to a being of flesh and blood!

'Come, Doctor!' the Doctor appeared. 'Let the test begin!'

The being the Doctor saw before him was brown with a curved horn on his forehead. He had cloven hands and feet, like a devil.

A blue streak of smoke appeared between the two aliens' foreheads, as each opponent pitted his will against the other – and the penalty for losing the macabre game was… DEATH!

'You cannot win, Doctor!' said Master Power.

'We'll see,' said Doctor Who. But underneath, the Doctor could feel himself being drained. Sure enough, he felt himself losing!

Calling up all his mental reserves, he put up a mental barrier, but still he could feel the Master Power's mind overwhelming him.

He collapsed on the floor, writhing in agony.

The streak of smoke got larger, the Doctor felt himself being turned inside-out, back to front, front to back, outside-in. He had to strike back, but he couldn't. He heard the Master Power's mocking voice.

‘Puny Time Lord, you are weak. I shall kill you!’

‘No!’ shouted the Doctor. ‘NO!’

Chapter Seven

With sheer determination, the Doctor fought back.

Slowly, slowly, the Doctor began to win. A picture of sheer anguish on his face, he rose to his feet.

‘No!’ shrieked the Master Power. ‘NOOOOOO!’

And with a shower of sparks, the hideous form of the Master Power fell lifeless to the floor.

Then it disintegrated.

With a sigh of relief, the Doctor leaned back against the wall. Suddenly he heard a babble of noise outside. He realised that now the Master Power was dead, Nyssa would be back to normal and the creatures would go back to normal.

Provided Nyssa had been taken over by the Master Power.

But she must’ve!

The Doctor decided he would go outside and collect Nyssa and Tegan and quietly leave.

But then something else occurred to him.

What if the creatures didn’t realise Nyssa was normal?

He remembered them say, ‘Death to the woman called Nyssa!’

He darted from the room and rushed outside. A group of Lurchoids was gathered round Nyssa. Tegan was on the floor, trapped under a tree branch.

‘Death to the woman called Nyssa!’ the Lurchoids shrieked.

The deadly rays hit Nyssa right in the face!

Chapter Eight

‘NO!’ cried Tegan.

‘You fools!’ yelled the Doctor. He ran to tegan, set her free, and then they both rushed to Nyssa but they could not see what was happening because the Lurchoids had blocked their view.

But then they all fell and melted!

‘Nyssa!’

‘Fool, Doctor! The Master Power still lives, within your companion. Hah hah!’

‘Oh, no!’ wailed Tegan.

‘The Master Power is power incarnate!’

While the Master Power was boasting—

‘Come on, Tegan, let’s get out of here.’

‘I’m with you!’

They ran off, as fast as they could.

The Master Power thought: ‘They must be trying to get back to their craft. Something must be done… and this body shall be very useful…’

The Doctor and Tegan were making their way to the TARDIS.

‘There it is!’ said Tegan.

Suddenly a giant plant sneaked around the TARDIS and then it slithered very quickly towards Tegan, seizing her, crushing her…

‘Doctor, help!’ she cried.

The Doctor lunged forward, only to be seized too!

Chapter Nine

‘Doctor, what can we do?’

‘Bite it!’

‘Bite it?’

‘Yes!’

So they both bit into the rubbery material of the thick tendril and a dull yellow liquid spurted out, and immediately it squiggled back out of sight.

‘Phew,’ breathed tegan.

‘Right, into the TARDIS so I can start work on a gun that will destroy the Master Power. It will go right to his brain and should destroy him—’

‘But won’t it affect Nyssa? He’s in *her* brain!’

‘You’re right! I’ll have to think of something…’

They entered the TARDIS.

And later…

‘It’s all right now, Tegan,’ said the Doctor. ‘This ray won’t affect Nyssa’s brain, but it will certainly affect the Master Power’s!’

‘Is it finished yet?’

‘Just a few finishing touches—’ BANG! And the gun exploded. ‘Oh well, if at first you don’t succeed…’

‘Try, try, try again!’ said Tegan. ‘Hurry, Doctor!’

He hurried to the laboratory.

Suddenly there was a banging on the TARDIS door. A faint voice broke through: ‘Tegan, let me in.’

‘Nyssa!’ exclaimed Tegan.

‘I’ve defeated the Master Power but the Lurchoids are after me.’

‘How did you defeat him?’

‘A voice in my head, the Master Power said he was weakening, so I applied all my brain power and defeated him,’ she replied. ‘Please, let me in!’

‘All right,’ said tegan.

An evil smile broke on Nyssa's face…

Final Chapter

Nyssa walked in. 'You trusting fool!' she said with malice.

'Nyssa?' Tegan asked incredulously.

'Master Power!' replied Nyssa.

'Oh, no,' breathed Tegan, and ran from the console room as a laser beam shot out, missing her head by inches.

Outrunning Nyssa, she rushed to the Doctor.

'Doctor, the Master Power in the form of Nyssa is after us! Have you finished the gun yet?'

'No! You'll have to decoy her.'

'Oh, thanks, Doc, you always give me the easy jobs!'

'I've got a spare costume around here…'

'What? Dress up as you? But I'm too small!'

'Yes, well, with a bit of luck the Master Power won't notice, you'll be too far away. Now, hurry!'

Quickly, Tegan got into the costume.

'And wear the hat, it will cover your hair,' the Doctor added.

Tegan ran from the room, not letting the baggy striped trousers slow her down.

Nyssa appeared. 'There you are, Doctor. Now I shall have my revenge!' A ray of light shot from her eyes and just missed Tegan's back.

This continued for a long time.

At last the Doctor was ready. Trusting himself in the fact he logically should be going the right way, he ran off.

Tegan tripped. Nyssa zoomed around the corner and saw Tegan

lying there.

‘A trick!’ she cried. ‘Where is the real Doctor?’

‘Here!’ he shouted, and fired the gun. There was a purple flash, a cry…

And Nyssa was lying on the floor, back to normal.

Epilogue

Nyssa was lying on a bed in one of the many rooms of the TARDIS.

‘Where has the Master Power gone?’ asked Nyssa.

‘Out of your head, thank goodness!’ said Tegan. ‘Those lasers were close!’

‘He should be totally destroyed,’ said the Doctor. ‘He’ll never enslave anyone else again.’

Tegan asked: ‘Will the creatures be back to normal?’

‘I hope so. Perhaps we’ll go back someday and find out…’

The words ended.

THE END